

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

**NSW GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC**

CORRECTED

At Virtual hearing, Video conference, Sydney on Thursday, 23 September 2021

The Committee met at 11:36 am

PRESENT

Mr David Shoebridge (Chair)

The Hon. Robert Borsak (Deputy Chair)

Ms Abigail Boyd

Ms Cate Faehrmann

The Hon. Scott Farlow

The Hon. John Graham

The Hon. Courtney Houssos

The Hon. Trevor Khan

The Hon. Daniel Mookhey

The Hon. Peter Poulos

The Hon. Penny Sharpe

The CHAIR: Welcome to this virtual hearing of the Public Accountability Committee as part of its inquiry into the New South Wales Government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before I commence I acknowledge that the land I am on—the land the Parliament is on—is Gadigal land and I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. The Committee also gives that respect to those members and witnesses participating in the hearing today who are First Nations peoples, and to those First Nations peoples who are participating through this broadcast. Today's hearing is being conducted as a fully virtual hearing, which enables the work of the Committee to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic without compromising the health and safety of members, staff and witnesses. As we break new ground with the technology I continue to ask for everyone's patience with any technical difficulties we have throughout the day. If participants do lose their internet connection—that includes members—I ask that they please rejoin through the link provided to them by the secretariat.

Today's hearing will be focused on the New South Wales Government's plan and road map out of lockdown. We will first hear evidence from representatives of the Department of Premier and Cabinet [DPC] and NSW Treasury and, later, from the Department of Education. The Committee will then hear from Professor Jodie McVernon, Director of Epidemiology at the Doherty Institute. As you would be aware, the Doherty Institute has been critical in providing the modelling relied upon, at least at a national level, for the move out of lockdown.

Before we commence I will make some brief comments about the procedure for today's hearing. While parliamentary privilege applies to statements made in the course of the hearing, it does not apply to statements made outside the hearing. I urge all witnesses and members to take due care. Committee hearings are not intended to be a forum to make adverse reflections on individuals. I ask people wherever possible to stick to the issues, not the people. All witnesses have a right to procedural fairness in accordance with the procedural fairness resolution adopted by the House in 2018. It is a matter this Committee takes seriously.

There may be some questions that a witness could answer only if they had more material to hand or could access other documents. In that case, witnesses are able to take a question on notice and we would seek a response within 21 days. I remind witnesses it is perfectly fine to provide an answer in less than 21 days. Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website and a recording of the hearing will be uploaded to Parliament's YouTube channel after the hearing. As always, a comprehensive written transcript will be provided by Hansard.

Finally, a few notes on virtual hearing etiquette to minimise interruptions and keep the hearing as smooth as possible. I ask Committee members and witnesses to ensure that they mute when they are not speaking and that they unmute prior to making a contribution to the meeting. I also ask Committee members to clearly identify who questions are directed to and I ask everyone to please state their name when they begin speaking. Members should also utilise the "raise your hand" function when making points of order. Members and witnesses should avoid speaking over each other, if at all possible. To assist Hansard, I remind members and witnesses to speak directly into the microphone wherever possible.

NATASHA LUSCHWITZ, Acting Deputy Secretary, Transformation Group, Department of Premier and Cabinet, sworn and examined

FIONA DEWAR, Deputy Secretary, Strategy, Delivery & Performance, Department of Regional NSW, affirmed and examined

JOANN WILKIE, Deputy Secretary, Economic Strategy and Productivity, NSW Treasury, on former affirmation

STEPHEN WALTERS, Chief Economist, NSW Treasury, on former affirmation

The CHAIR: I now welcome our first witnesses. I note that Ms Wilkie and Mr Walters—I hope Mr Walters is joining us; there have been some connection difficulties—have already been sworn in at an earlier hearing. I remind you both that you remain on that former oath or affirmation and do not need to be sworn again. Do any of you wish to start by making a short opening statement?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: No thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Alright. In that case I will hand over to the Opposition, who will commence questioning on behalf of the Committee.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you, Chair, and I thank the witnesses for their attendance today. Chair, if it is possible I am going to direct these questions in the first instance to the Treasury. I think that perhaps the etiquette is that I give Ms Wilkie the opportunity to decide whether she will answer or refer to Mr Walters. I start by asking you about the first initiative that the Government has announced as part of its recovery strategy: Westinvest, which was announced earlier this week. Of course, this is the fund that the Government says will have \$5 billion in it. The Treasurer says it is "the first stage of our economic recovery strategy which the Government is currently developing for release in October". Ms Wilkie, how many jobs do you expect Westinvest to create?

Ms WILKIE: Mr Mookhey, the number of jobs that would be created by Westinvest is going to be dependent— [audio malfunction]. Sorry.

The CHAIR: Sorry, I think it is best we try to address this. I think that the sound is good news—I think it is Mr Walters joining us—but I just might invite Mr Walters, having joined us, to put himself on mute. [Audio malfunction]. Mr Walters, if you can hear us, it would be of assistance to place yourself on mute. Sorry, Mr Mookhey, I will return to you now.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you. I think the question, Ms Wilkie, was how many jobs do you expect Westinvest to create—and, now that I get the chance to re-ask the question, over what period?

Ms WILKIE: Mr Mookhey, the number of jobs—at this point, as far as I am aware, the Government does not have any expectations or estimates on that. It will be dependent on the exact projects that are invested in and those, as per the Government's comments publicly, have not yet been determined.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Okay. This is a \$5 billion fund, which is bigger than the State Government's investment in JobSaver, but at this point Treasury has never modelled how many jobs it will create, is that fair to say?

Ms WILKIE: How many jobs an investment will create—if I am talking about the way you would go about an economic assessment of how many jobs would be created by any particular investment of Government, you do require some detail about the nature of the project and the nature of the investment. At this stage, the Government has announced that it is going to put \$5 billion into projects such as parks, urban spaces and green space, community infrastructure, local schools, creating and enhancing arts and cultural facilities, revitalising high streets, and clearing local traffic. It has indicated that business cases and those sorts of things will be required for investments coming out of that fund. At this stage, without that information on those projects and those business cases there is, at this point, no assessment of the number of jobs that would be created from this fund.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I appreciate that as an answer, Ms Wilkie. I have the same press release that I think you might be making a reference to, in which that detail is stated about what the fund can be used for. Has the Government or Treasury identified the first projects that Westinvest money will be used on?

Ms WILKIE: Not to my knowledge, but I look after the economic and strategic productivity area of the department. This sort of issue will actually go through Expenditure Review Committee [ERC] processes, which is under a different area of responsibility in the department. I am afraid I will have to take that question on notice.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I appreciate that, Ms Wilkie, but the reason I am directing these questions to you is that the Treasurer did identify this as being the first stage of the economic recovery strategy,

which I think you and Mr Walters, I presume, have an involvement in. I might just ask that question: Were you consulted, Ms Wilkie and/or Mr Walters, about the creation of Westinvest prior to the Treasurer's announcement?

Ms WILKIE: The nature of these sorts of issues is that, in terms of the recovery plan, all of the department is involved in providing input to advice that goes to the Treasurer.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: That is true, but I am asking, perhaps specifically to Mr Walters now: As the Chief Economist, did you design Westinvest?

Mr WALTERS: [Inaudible].

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I think you are on mute, Mr Walters.

Mr WALTERS: [Inaudible].

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: No, sadly we cannot hear you now.

Mr WALTERS: —just cannot.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Now I can, yes. You are back!

Mr WALTERS: Ah! You have me now?

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I do. You are echoing.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: I think, Stephen, we might have you on two channels—both on the phone and on the video conference now. It might be problematic.

Mr WALTERS: Can you hear me now?

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Yes we can, Mr Walters. The question to you—

Mr WALTERS: I cannot hear.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: —as the Chief Economist of New South Wales—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Mr Mookhey, I think—

Mr WALTERS: I have nothing.

The CHAIR: —Mr Walters is not able to hear you.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Ms Wilkie, are you in a position to advise us if you specifically were—not just in general input, but were you the designer? Was the creation of Westinvest recommended by Treasury or was this created elsewhere in the government?

Ms WILKIE: I am not in a position to be able to answer that question. It is not part of my area of responsibility in the department.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Did Treasury recommend the establishment of Westinvest?

Ms WILKIE: That goes to issues that are covered by Cabinet-in-confidence material, Mr Mookhey, in terms of—

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Okay. I will not press you, Ms Wilkie, I appreciate that. Can I just then ask: Where is the \$5 billion coming from?

Ms WILKIE: Again, this is not—I will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: The Treasurer was asked this at the press conference and he made some reference to some distributions from the NSW Generations Fund, which was a bit of a surprise because I do not think the Generations Fund legislation allows that to be used for this purpose; it only allows it to be used for debt clearance. Is this just money that is already in the budget that has just been given a new brand name or is it actually new money?

Ms WILKIE: I will have to take that on notice.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Okay, thank you Ms Wilkie. Do we know when the first project will actually start?

Ms WILKIE: Until a project has been approved under the guidelines then, no, we do not have a start date.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Do we know when the last project will be approved? If this is meant to be an announcement, as per what the Treasurer said, to kickstart the economic recovery, when can the people of western Sydney expect to see this money and when will this money be finished?

Ms WILKIE: The details of how projects are going to be approved are being developed. Consultation, eligibility criteria, assessment processes—all of those governance arrangements are being worked on and are under consideration by the Government at the moment.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: But can we at least get a guarantee that this money is not going to be put to existing projects but will facilitate new projects? Or is it simply the case that we have just rebadged what we have already got to spend and put it in this fund?

Ms WILKIE: The projects that are going to be funded from this are going to be determined by the eligibility criteria that are being considered by Government at the moment.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I have two more questions on this before I pass to my colleagues, but we might return to this later. Is this a special purpose account? What is the legal form of Westinvest?

Ms WILKIE: I will have to take that on notice—

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Point of order: I have let the Hon. Daniel Mookhey continue for a while, but when we look at what this inquiry is all about we find that it is about the Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether this is a special purpose fund or not does not go to that point of whether this is the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and it really strays outside the terms of reference.

The CHAIR: I understand your point of order, Mr Farlow, and I do not think I need to hear from you, Mr Mookhey. This is clearly related to COVID-19. This is a fund that has been promised to assist the communities in western Sydney with the economic recovery following the lockdown directly related to COVID-19. Mr Mookhey's questions are well within order.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you, Chair. Ms Wilkie, did you want me to restate the question?

Ms WILKIE: I believe I answered it. You were asking about the legal status of the fund.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Sure. Restart NSW has its own legislation and its own governance requirements for the money to be used. Can we at least expect that Westinvest is going to have its own law?

Ms WILKIE: Mr Mookhey, Westinvest and these sorts of structures and arrangements are not in my area of responsibility of the department. I will have to take this on notice for you.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I appreciate that, Ms Wilkie. My final question refers to the design of this. I have, from the publicly available information, the local government areas [LGAs] that are eligible to nominate projects. The one that is missing is Bayside Council, despite Bayside Council being an LGA of concern that has been subject to special rules. Was there a particular reason why Bayside was excluded and did Treasury recommend to exclude Bayside?

Ms WILKIE: I will have to take that on notice, Mr Mookhey.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I might pass to my colleagues and we might resume this in the next session, if that is possible.

The CHAIR: As you do that, Mr Mookhey, I might just double-check with Mr Walters if he can hear us now.

Mr WALTERS: I can, Mr Shoebridge. Can you hear me?

The CHAIR: We can. It is a pleasure to hear your voice, Mr Walters.

Mr WALTERS: Excellent.

The CHAIR: I do remind you that you are on your former oath and/or affirmation and you do not need to be sworn in again. Welcome to the hearing. I will now hand it back to the Opposition.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you, Chair. I might just continue those questions to Ms Wilkie. The Treasurer revealed this package had been under development, as it was announced, for six months. But as you have indicated, there is very little detail at the moment. Has Treasury been involved in this planning for six months?

Ms WILKIE: Mr Graham, I believe the Treasurer's comment in relation to being under development for six months was not in relation to the Westinvest fund. But if you can tell me the precise source that you are quoting that from then I will be able to check that.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Perhaps on notice you could confirm when Treasury commenced work on this fund. You have indicated—

Ms WILKIE: But please also get the source of that statement so we can check that.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I am referring to the public reports of this. I am happy to provide on notice the specific ones I am referring to. Turning to the detail of the fund, how much of the \$3 billion is allocated to each of the six line items, the six dot points in that release that my colleague referred to?

Ms WILKIE: I believe, as far as I am aware, that is part of the governance arrangements that are still to be determined. Any further commentary would be speculation on my part. We would have to wait for the governance arrangements to be agreed.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Turning to the sixth of those dot points—that is, "Clearing local traffic"—can you tell us what this refers to, what is described here?

Ms WILKIE: My understanding is that further clarity on each of those line items will be provided as part of the eligibility criteria for projects and the governance arrangements.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: One of the concerns about the funding of WestConnex was that many of the roads that lead on and off WestConnex were not funded. They were excluded from the \$16.8 billion funding. Is that what this money is going towards: funding the local roads that lead on and off WestConnex, which communities expect were funded but that the Government has not funded?

Ms WILKIE: I refer to my previous answer. The nature of these projects—what will be considered eligible projects—is still to be determined. We will have to take that one on notice as well.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Could you do so particularly in relation to dot point five as well, "Revitalising high streets"? I took this as a reference to the existing Your High Street Program, the \$15 million Department of Planning, Industry and Environment [DPIE] program. Can you confirm that is the case, that this is an extension of that program?

Ms WILKIE: I will take that on notice, yes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Great, thank you. I am happy to be guided, Chair, about who this next question is best put to. One of the concerns about the nature of the lockdowns at the moment is a sense that there have been "two Sydneys". The Government has now changed the restrictions that the citizens are under. However, workers in lockdown LGAs still face many restrictions about the way they move around the city and the obligations they have that are different to the rest of the city. Can either DPC or Treasury confirm whether or not that is expected to change?

The CHAIR: I think we might first go to Ms Luschwitz or Mr Walters.

Ms LUSCHWITZ: Thank you, Chair. I can speak in a high level. I believe you are referring to the authorised workers list and that, indeed, the authorised individuals on the authorised workers list have certain set requirements in relation to their movement outside the local government areas of concern. You have also referenced that the Government has recently tried to bring into parity, let us say, the restrictions that the majority of greater metropolitan Sydney is subject to in alignment more broadly with the local government areas of concern. In relation to whether or not there will be full parity and/or how those authorised workers are managed going forward, I understand that will be the subject of continued health advice into the NSW Crisis Policy Committee and considered by them.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: But as we stand today, if we are looking at the road map there is no indication about whether there will be an equal approach for those workers. There is now for citizens but not for workers. There is no clarity about whether workers will be treated equally regardless of where they live in Sydney, going forward, as part of the road map?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: The road map obviously is in relation to the relaxation of restrictions for double-vaccinated individuals; that is statewide. But the Premier and the Government have made clear that there is fine-tuning and that health advice will continue to be referred to in relation to that, in particular where there are high case loads in designated areas. That is the current information available.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: On that road map, when freedoms are reached—when we hit 70 per cent vaccination and freedoms are extended to people across New South Wales—is it expected that each of 12 LGAs

will come out of lockdown? Can you give us a guarantee that they will be out, or will they be constrained by high case numbers in some cases?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: In relation to their high case numbers, I cannot make predictions in relation to that. In relation to how they will be treated when it comes to the road map, the Crisis Policy Committee continues to take on a multitude of advice, including health advice, and that will form how those LGAs are considered at the time that we reach 70 per cent vaccination.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: As of today under the road map there is no clarity about that? Depending on high case numbers, lockdown LGAs might be allowed out or might not be allowed out when we hit 11 October, is that correct?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: I refer to my previous answer in relation to it. I can go through the road map as to what has been publicly stated. Again, going back to that, the Government has indicated that it will continue to fine-tune what has been announced in relation to that. It will take on board additional health advice. It will monitor the circumstances as they change, and certainly if there are drastic changes in circumstances—it is obviously a very dynamic environment. If cases within designated areas remain too high Government will consider how the road map applies.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: That is certainly something which will be of real concern to people expecting freedom in these lockdown LGAs on 11 October. I might turn to another worker issue. This is of real concern to the logistics industry, to hospitality and obviously to health care—to a whole range of industries in New South Wales: the workforce rules about people who come into close contact or casual contact even after they have been vaccinated. The concern there, of course, is that major bits of the workforce are not available to work, they are unable to work for 14 days, after being a close contact. For double-vaccinated workers, is the Government considering changing those guidelines, the provisions? This is one of the questions that industries have been really saying makes a huge difference to their ability to keep the doors open once this road map kicks in.

Ms LUSCHWITZ: Thank you, Mr Graham. I agree that New South Wales government agencies have been hearing from industries in relation to a multitude of issues. They have flagged the treatment of close and casual contacts, not just in relation to their workforce but indeed to the individuals that they provide services to. As part of the announcement on 9 September of the road map the Government did flag that they would be coming forward with updated advice in relation to close contacts. I would say that how that is managed is a matter for Health. I understand that there are national considerations as to the approach and that they also rely on a multitude of inputs in relation to that. But the Government has committed, as part of providing more detail around the road map, to come forward also with more detail as to how close and casual contacts will be dealt with.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: When will that—

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Graham. We will return to another round of Opposition questioning but this round has expired. I hand over to Ms Boyd.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you, Chair, and good morning to you all. Thank you for being here. We have just clicked over into the afternoon, so good afternoon. Perhaps I could go to you, Ms Wilkie, and just pick up on those questions my colleagues were asking in relation to the new Westinvest. The \$11.1 billion coming in for the sale of the remaining stake of WestConnex: When do you expect to receive that?

Ms WILKIE: I will have to take that on notice, Ms Boyd. It is not part of my area of responsibilities in the department so I do not have any information.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. Is it correct that when that money does come in it will need to be put into the NSW Generations Fund?

Ms WILKIE: I will also have to take that on notice. It is not my area of responsibility.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I believe you were there in estimates when this NSW Generations Fund was being discussed with Mr Pratt. He categorically told us at that time that those moneys from the sale from the second part of WestConnex would need to be put straight into the NSW Generations Fund. Do you recall that answer being given by Mr Pratt?

Ms WILKIE: Yes, but as I said, this is not my area of responsibility. I need to take this on notice. It is not my area to comment on.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I understand you may not want to comment on something that is outside of your responsibility but it would certainly be something you have knowledge of, would it not?

Ms WILKIE: No, because I do not deal with this sort of information and these issues on a day-to-day basis. They are dealt with by other deputy secretaries in the department.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I understand. Look at the statement from Mr Pratt that that money would need to be put into the NSW Generations Fund and then look at the announcement from the Premier and Deputy Premier that stated:

The unprecedented boost was made possible by the State's strong financial management and asset recycling strategy, with the NSW Government today announcing the sale of its residual 49 per cent stake in WestConnex for \$11.1 billion—

Would you agree that that statement in the press release in relation to Westinvest implies that there is new money coming into general revenue for use in Westinvest?

Ms WILKIE: Ms Boyd, I am not going to speculate or draw implications from material in a hearing of this nature. I will take the question on notice.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I understand from your previous answers that there has been, or there seems to be, limited input from Treasury in relation to this, in that you are not able to tell us any estimate of jobs or why certain areas have been excluded. We do not know what the eligibility criteria are. We do not even know really where this money is coming from. Is this more of just a communications release and a thought bubble than an actual fund?

Ms WILKIE: Ms Boyd, I believe you are taking an interpretation I have not intended from my comments. This is not my area. Dealing with the WestConnex sale and the set-up of the Westinvest fund is not my area of responsibility in the department. I do not have the level of detail to answer the questions you have been asking, which is why I have been saying I will take these questions on notice and the department will respond to you. To imply anything else from the answers that I have given would be wrong.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I am not implying. I am asking you if it is correct and you are telling me that you would have to take that on notice. The reference—

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: No, she is telling you that it is not correct and she is only stating her own opinion!

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Sorry, is that a point of order?

The CHAIR: I ask members to come to order. Mr Farlow, if you want to take a point of order the best way is to raise your hand. Ms Boyd, I think Ms Wilkie is endeavouring to provide the information she can give in this hearing. I have always found that Ms Wilkie endeavours to provide the information fairly she can in the hearing and has indicated what she needs to take on notice.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. Just to help out my colleague, previously Mr Graham was referring to the six months that the Government has spent working to develop the fund. That comes from an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, dated 20 September. But can I just confirm with you—and I do note that you are taking this on notice—who in the department is responsible, then?

Ms WILKIE: For WestConnex or Westinvest?

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Westinvest.

Ms WILKIE: San Midha, the Deputy Secretary for Policy and Budget.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. I turn, then, to ask some questions about the reopening road map. I understand that when it was first announced a bunch of businesses were grouped together but without a huge amount of detail. Has that now been fleshed out? I am particularly interested in the reference to hairdressers, nail salons and other businesses of that kind. Has that been expanded on so that we know, for example, whether beauticians are included in that? Who can answer that question for me?

Ms DEWAR: Ms Boyd, it is Fiona Dewar. I will take that question. I think the group of businesses you are referring to have been referred to as personal services. In the public health order, "personal services" in the definitions is expanded to include beauticians, nail salons, tattoo parlours, hairdressers and a range of other businesses, but they are spelt out in the public health order definitions.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I understand that that included sex services premises previously when we came out of lockdown last time. Does that include sex services premises this time?

Ms DEWAR: No, that is incorrect. Sex services premises have a separate definition under the public health order.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: And when are they able to reopen under the proposed road map?

Ms DEWAR: At the moment I believe they are referred to as "intimate services" under the public health order and they are not listed in the settings advised by the Government on 9 September.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: We do not know, is that what we are saying? We do not know when they will be allowed to open?

Ms DEWAR: What I am saying is they are not in the current 70 per cent road map for reopening.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. Okay, I will take that up separately. Back to you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Ms Boyd. Mr Walters, do we still have you?

Mr WALTERS: We do, Chair, we do.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Have you in your role as Chief Economist had a look at what the economic cost has been so far of the lockdown following the most recent Delta outbreak from mid-June?

Mr WALTERS: I have.

The CHAIR: Can you give an indication about what the cost has been to the New South Wales economy?

Mr WALTERS: In general terms, Mr Shoebridge, it does vary depending on the level of restriction. The Treasurer announced—I think it was back in late July—that the weekly cost to the economy was \$1.3 billion. Since then there have been changes to the health orders that have included more of the State being restricted, but also since then we have had an easing of restrictions in other areas, including in the regions. So that cost varies, but the Treasurer's comment on \$1.3 billion was the numbers the Treasury was assuming at the time.

The CHAIR: Alright, but I am asking you now: As the Chief Economist, you must be reviewing this closely. What is your best estimate of the cost to date?

Mr WALTERS: Well, the accumulated cost, that is a weekly cost. We are in week 13 of the lockdown now. If you do a quick calculation of those numbers it is in the realms of—if every week was the same, which of course they are not; that is the problem with trying to say the total cost. If you are after a weekly cost, the current cost of restrictions is around that. But in terms of aggregate cost, we just cannot aggregate that because restrictions change and different parts of the State have been in restriction, including construction, albeit briefly. The latest information on the cost to the State is that \$1.3 billion per week.

The CHAIR: So something of the order of \$15 billion to now would be a ballpark figure for what the economic cost to date has been, is that right?

Mr WALTERS: That is a figure that has been quoted by other economists. We do not have an aggregate cost because, as I have said, the restrictions change so the weekly cost changes. The advice we are giving to Government on the actual number is Cabinet in confidence because the restriction levels change. But as you said, the number that other economists have used—I have not informed them of that number, but these are the numbers that they are using—is somewhere around \$15 billion to \$16 billion, yes.

The CHAIR: Mr Walters, you are the Chief Economist for New South Wales. You cannot tell me it is a government secret what the actual cost to the New South Wales economy has been. You are not seriously telling me that that is a government secret covered by Cabinet in confidence, are you?

Mr WALTERS: I am telling you it is Cabinet in confidence, Mr Chair.

The CHAIR: Sitting there now, you have an estimate of what the cost to date is, is that right, which you have provided to Cabinet?

Mr WALTERS: That is correct.

The CHAIR: You are saying that is a State secret that you will not provide to the people of New South Wales covered by Cabinet in confidence. Is that seriously your evidence?

Mr WALTERS: I am saying it is Cabinet in confidence, Mr Chair.

The CHAIR: Have you provided an assessment of what the likely cost will be to the New South Wales Government? Do we know what the cost to date to the New South Wales Government has been?

Mr WALTERS: You mean in terms of the cost to the budget, not the economy?

The CHAIR: Correct.

Mr WALTERS: No, that is not in—I do not handle budget matters, Mr Shoebridge. I provide advice on the cost to economic activity, unemployment. The—

The CHAIR: I will stop you there and I will throw it to Ms Wilkie.

Ms WILKIE: Like the Chief Economist, my responsibility is in the economics area, not in the budget area. In terms of budget costs, those I believe have been provided to ERC but they are Cabinet in confidence and the responsibility of another area of the department.

The CHAIR: Ms Wilkie, I am going to ask you now: What has been the cost to the New South Wales State Government budget of the lockdown since mid-June? Will you provide that?

Ms WILKIE: We will take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Thank you. This question is probably for Ms Dewar: What, if any, support to actual individuals, particularly those in western and south-western Sydney, is being provided by the New South Wales Government? I might ask you to start with assistance in paying their utility bills, which for many households have gone through the roof while they have been living at home in lockdown and working from home in lockdown. What assistance is the New South Wales Government paying so people can keep the power on?

Ms DEWAR: Thanks, Mr Chair. Unfortunately I cannot go into detail around support payments for individuals, businesses or other. It is not the area that I look after.

The CHAIR: Is anybody from either Treasury or DPC able to provide any details about assistance provided to those people, especially in western and south-western Sydney, who are basically having trouble keeping the power on, given the extended bills they are getting as a result of lockdown? Can anyone provide any assistance in that regard? I am going to take that silence as a collective "no".

Mr WALTERS: Mr Shoebridge, my advice is on a macroeconomic, aggregate level. I cannot provide an answer on specific measures like that. I am not involved in those types of discussions.

The CHAIR: Ms Wilkie, will you take on notice what, if any, assistance is being provided to individual households by the New South Wales Government to deal with utility bills?

Ms WILKIE: Yes, I can take that on notice. Again, payments to individuals are not the responsibility of the Treasury portfolio area. We deal with business support. But I will take that on notice for you.

The CHAIR: Then I will ask Ms Luschwitz to take it on notice on the part of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. Could you pay particular attention to whether or not there has been any promotion of the New South Wales Government's Energy Account Payment Assistance vouchers and what support has been provided under that voucher scheme since mid-June?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: I can take that on notice, Chair, but I would refer—your original question was in relation to broad supports. The nsw.gov.au website has a page which lists all the support services provided to individuals. There are hardship payments available. There are test, trace and isolate payments available. There is a number, not just for south-western Sydney but, in particular, western Sydney—supports go beyond financial supports but, indeed, mental health supports. Obviously there are a lot of agencies that are working based on the needs of different communities. Multicultural NSW continues to lead on specific community needs within, in particular, south-western Sydney. Aboriginal Affairs NSW has been working in western New South Wales—sorry, Chair, was that not what—

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Luschwitz, I was asking for how much has been paid to individuals. Are you able to provide us with a figure?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: I am unable to provide that but I am happy to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Ms Wilkie, is it true that not a single cent of the \$5 billion that has been earmarked through the sale of WestConnex—however you wish to describe it—not a single dollar is going to be allocated to help actual households?

Ms WILKIE: Sorry, can you ask the question again? I am not sure I understand the question.

The CHAIR: There is the \$5 billion fund that has been announced by the Premier, apparently to support western and south-western Sydney. Is it true that none of that is going to be targeted to helping households who are having trouble paying their bills and paying their rent as a result of lockdown? Not one dollar is going to be allocated in that regard.

Ms WILKIE: The nature of the fund is that it is to provide investment to things like parks and urban spaces—the community infrastructure—so while none of that is in terms of what the Government has announced

the fund is likely to encompass, that is more in the space of investments in the community rather than direct payments to households. But those projects in and of themselves will benefit local communities, so that there will be indirect benefits to households in those communities.

The CHAIR: Mr Walters, is NSW Treasury doing any analysis of the likely quantum of deferred rental payments—basically, rental debt—accrued during the lockdown, and whether or not any of that has a particular focus to western and south-western Sydney?

Mr WALTERS: I cannot answer on behalf of Treasury, Mr Shoebridge, but I can say that I am not doing that sort of analysis. But I would refer to Ms Wilkie for a broader Treasury perspective.

The CHAIR: Ms Wilkie, I will ask you both in relation to the deferred rental payments, effectively rental debt, but also deferred mortgage payments, mortgage debt, is NSW Treasury doing any modelling to understand what the scale of that debt will be, especially for western and south-western Sydney as they come out of lockdown?

Ms WILKIE: The Treasury portfolio has responsibility for commercial and retail leases. So in the commercial and retail lease space, yes, we are looking into information—or looking as best we can at issues around rents deferrals and agreements between landlords and tenants through the commercial leases regulations and that sort of thing about what sort of rent debts may be accruing. But that is just in the commercial and retail lease space. We do not have responsibility for residential and mortgage debt. Although given the burden of an aggregate level of mortgage debt, the implications that will have full confidence and economic activity, we are looking at that at a very sort of high level. Again, that is not something we look at in a great deal of detail. And in both of those cases, we are interested in how that is impacting across the State. There are going to be regional impacts in regional areas, particularly those in the hospitality- and tourism-type industries where there may be particular impacts around rental debt as well. I think it is more true to say that we are looking at that issue in as much detail as we can—it is difficult to get data on that—and we are interested in the impact across the State, not just in one particular area or another.

The CHAIR: Do you have any figures that you can provide to us, first of all on a statewide basis, if it is limited to the commercial space, and if you have any granular data on a regional basis, can you provide that?

Ms WILKIE: Yes. I will have to take it on notice. I do not have that data with me. A lot of the data we are able to access on that actually comes through the Small Business Commission and their responsibility for mediation. So we will look at what we have and make sure they are no privacy or other concerns about providing that sort of data. So it may just come at a high level, rather than any degree of granularity. But we will have a look and see what we can provide.

The CHAIR: We will come back to this. I note that, in the face of the requirement to provide answers to Parliament, those privacy considerations should be carefully reviewed.

Ms WILKIE: Yes.

The CHAIR: We will go to the Opposition now. Mr Mookhey, you have committed the sin of not muting.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I am sorry. Forgive me. I might direct these questions to Ms Dewar, or whoever is the senior representative of the Department of Premier and Cabinet. Which Minister is responsible for administering Westinvest?

Ms DEWAR: Sorry, Mr Mookhey, I am from the Department of Regional NSW.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Then I might go to the other representative from DPC. Which Minister is responsible for administering Westinvest?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: I am afraid I do not know the structure of the announcement in terms of administrative responsibility or if there are legislative responsibilities in relation to the fund. So I cannot comment on that, I am sorry.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I might ask Treasury, Ms Wilkie and/or Mr Walters, do you know which Minister is in charge of this \$5 billion fund?

Ms WILKIE: I will have to take that on notice, Mr Mookhey.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: The two Ministers who were there for the announcement and whose names are on the press release are Treasurer Perrottet and Minister Ayres, one of which is supported by Treasury and the other is supported by DPC. Are they the two Ministers who are responsible for this?

Ms WILKIE: I would just advise in relation to Minister Ayres, he is supported by Investment NSW and as such in relation to his responsibilities there—[disorder].

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Yes, I acknowledge that, Ms Wilkie, but that is a part of your cluster. Your department took it off the Treasury, so I am across that. It is a really simple question. This is a \$5 billion investment. Which Minister is in charge of it?

Ms WILKIE: I think in relation, Mr Mookhey, you made clear, as you are aware, that at the announcement the Treasurer and Minister Ayres were there and they will certainly be involved in relation to it. If you are talking about administration of funds, that is something that I have said I am unable to provide advice on.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I appreciate that. Now that we have the Chief Economist back, I am going to put the question I did put to the Chief Economist but perhaps he did not hear me. Chief Economist, did you recommend the establishment and creation of Westinvest?

Mr WALTERS: Firstly, Mr Mookhey, I apologise for not being able to hear you earlier.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Not your fault, Mr Walters. It was not your fault.

Mr WALTERS: Thank you. No, I was not involved in the design of the fund.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Did you have any input whatsoever in the design of this \$5 billion fund?

Mr WALTERS: Mr Mookhey, my advice to Government is, as I mentioned earlier, in general macroeconomic terms, not specific to funds or administration of proceeds of the sale of an asset.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I press the question again to you and Ms Wilkie. The reason I ask is because, Ms Wilkie, you are the Deputy Secretary of Economic Strategy and Productivity and Mr Walters is the Chief Economist, yet the impression that we are getting is that neither of you is involved in the establishment of this \$5 billion fund. So is this actually important to our economic recovery or not?

Mr WALTERS: Perhaps again, Mr Mookhey, if I make some general comments about we know that large parts of western Sydney have been adversely affected by the Delta outbreak of the pandemic in particular. So I am supportive of Government doing what it can to support the families and businesses in western Sydney. I think that is very important. But that is the kind of advice I give to Government. It is high-level advice—

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I appreciate that. I want to be very clear, I am not being critical of you or Ms Wilkie at all. I am just trying to understand how this decision was made because it is a fund that is bigger than JobSaver. I want to know whether or not the Chief Economist has said that it is vital for restoring jobs in western Sydney.

Mr WALTERS: Stimulus to parts of the economy adversely affected by the pandemic is an important part of the recovery process, yes.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you. Ms Wilkie, the Treasurer said:

This investment is just the first stage of our economic recovery strategy which the Government is currently developing for release in October.

Are you leading the development of that strategy?

Ms WILKIE: That strategy is being led by the Deputy Secretary for Policy and Budget, Sam Midha.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Chief Economist, are you involved in the development of that strategy?

Mr WALTERS: I provide, again, general advice through Mr Midha into the task force responsible for that project, yes. [Inaudible].

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I appreciate that. I will not press it further in that context but I will ask just a few more questions about this matter. The other local government area [LGA] that was excluded was Georges River, despite it being an LGA of concern. They are not ineligible for it. Is there any light that can be shed as to why they have been excluded?

Ms WILKIE: We will take that on notice, Mr Mookhey.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I appreciate that, Ms Wilkie. The other point is that we have established that \$3 billion can be used for the six matters referred to in the Treasurer's press release. It states:

The remaining \$2 billion will be reserved for high priority projects to be developed in consultation with local communities.

How is the Government intending to consult those local communities?

Ms WILKIE: As the media release and other Government comments have made clear, the nature of those consultations and how those consultations are going to be conducted—things like the eligibility criteria—are under consideration by Government at the moment.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I direct this to you and DPC—either of you who wishes to answer: What assurance can you give us that the consultation for this \$2 billion has to be a lot better than the consultation which led to the Stronger Communities grants program? That question is directed to DPC and Treasury. Right now we are talking about a serious amount of money here. What confidence can you give us that this is going to be done better than the Stronger Communities grants program?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: Mr Mookhey, I cannot make any comment in relation to your assertion in relation to the Stronger Communities process. Ms Wilkie has outlined the process for how the Government will determine consultation with the community around the fund that you are now speaking in relation to.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: This is the last question I want to ask. I am just going to put this to you because right now the impression that has been given is that we have \$5 billion being spent on a program. We do not know how many jobs will be created. We do not know which Minister is in charge. We do not know when the money is going to be spent. We do not know when the money will run out. It looks like this is not a policy; it is a press release. Can you give us any sense that this is actually a well thought-through strategy, or is it instead a distraction from the fact that the Government broke its promise about privatising WestConnex?

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Point of order: None of these witnesses has made—

The CHAIR: I note your point of order and I think I know the thrust of it.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Let me state the point of order. None of these witnesses has responsibility for this program, which they have all indicated throughout this hearing. It is very unfair for the Hon. Daniel Mookhey to put such a proposition to any of these witnesses before the Committee.

The CHAIR: Mr Farlow, I am going to invite the Hon. Daniel Mookhey to put the question again noting that these are departmental witnesses. They are not responsible for the policy. They can speak to its practical implementation but they are not responsible for the policies. The Hon. Daniel Mookhey might focus his attention on that.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: I will just mention five [inaudible]. I would just put it this way: Can you give us any assurance that this is actually a policy, and not a press release, that reflects a strategy for economic recovery for Sydney's west?

Ms WILKIE: Mr Mookhey, as the Chief Economist has already indicated, a policy—a Government decision of this nature where a significant amount of money is going to be directed for investment into a part of the State that has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic is appropriate in terms of economic recovery.

The Hon. DANIEL MOOKHEY: Thank you. I will pass to my colleagues.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I might return to Ms Luschwitz from the Department of Premier and Cabinet, if that is okay, and those questions I was asking about workers, in particular double vaccinated workers who might come into close contact and/or casual contact with COVID cases and the fact that you have told us that the Government has said it will change those guidelines. When will that occur? We are now 11 working days away from when we might open the doors on 11 October. When will the hundreds of thousands of businesses, who are relying on this information to plan, find out what the new guidelines are?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: Thank you, Mr Graham. In relation to updated advice in relation to close and casual contacts, the Government has said it will issue revised guidance and that it will do that closer to the date of reopening.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Can you give us some assurance that the more than 300,000 businesses, who need this information in the private sector to do their job, will not find out the midnight before in the public health order what the rules of the game are here?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: I would just refer to my previous answer. The Government has said closer to the reopening date it will make that updated guidance available.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Turning to that reopening date, there have been repeated references publicly to the fact that we might hit the 70 per cent vaccination rate on maybe 7 or 8 October and then open on 11 October. How is that modelling being done? Is it being conducted via NSW Health, or are we perhaps relying on Federal modelling, or is it something that DPC or Treasury is in charge of?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: Sorry, I am just a bit unclear in relation to the modelling. Are you referring to modelling as to when we will hit the 70 per cent of all vaccination?

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Correct, precisely.

Ms LUSCHWITZ: I will make some preliminary statements. Perhaps Ms Dewar would like to make some additional. The New South Wales Government is very transparent with how it is tracking against single and double doses and there are various extrapolations in relation to the gross over seven day periods, et cetera. As such, there are many commentators who are making assumptions and assertions as to what that date is. In terms of vaccination supplies, that is a matter for the Commonwealth and New South Wales has a role in some of the delivery of that and—

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: My question is, who is in charge in the New South Wales Government of conducting that modelling about that all-important date about when things might open? Who is the agency in charge?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: I guess I would say that, again, with Commonwealth responsibility for supply, that is one of the inputs. NSW Health are obviously intrinsic to some of the delivery in relation to that, and I would say that they are best placed to provide information in relation to the modelling in relation to when we would hear the—[disorder].

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you for that answer. If you could perhaps take on notice the agency arrangements about that modelling as this continues. Can I turn now to the issue about outdoor dining? I might direct this again to you, Ms Luschwitz, in the first instance. The Government has moved to liberalise outdoor dining, although really only in The Rocks and the 240 businesses in the City of Sydney. In much of the rest of the Sydney, in much of the rest of the State, none of the rules has changed. On 11 October, in 11 working days, outdoor becomes crucial to safely operating, and for hospitality businesses outdoor activity will be at one per two metres squared. People will be allowed to stand up and drink, as an example. It is absolutely crucial. None of this preparation has occurred outside of the CBD, especially The Rocks, for businesses to do this. Will the rules change? What support is there for businesses to move outdoors? Health says it is safe, but these businesses do not know what the rules of the game are from Government. Will anything change between now and 11 October?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: Sorry, there are a lot of questions in that one. In relation to the 11 October date, that is a date that you have put. The Government has not said that. The Government has said—

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: I accept that, yes.

Ms LUSCHWITZ: In relation to will there be any changes ahead of the commencement, say, the official commencement of the road map and the relaxation of restrictions, the Government has continued to take on board a variety of different inputs and indeed Health advice and how the pandemic is tracking against different LGAs and has made amendments reflective of that when the advice to them is that it is safe to do so. I cannot comment in relation to what additional information may go before the Crisis Policy Committee for now and the 70 per cent.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Thank you for that answer. Turning to that Westinvest Fund, it has been six months in development, according to the Treasurer—and I thank my colleague for pointing out that Herald article a day after it was announced. Was DPC involved in the six-month development of this Westinvest scheme, which so far is just six dot points on a press release?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: I cannot speak in my role as Acting Deputy Secretary for the Transformation Group in relation to my engagement. But, indeed, with Minister Ayres being supported more broadly by DPC and in particular by Investment NSW, I can take on notice in terms of where in DPC that engagement could have occurred.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: If you could take that on notice, that would be very welcome. Could you also take on notice who are the Ministers, given the problems we have had with grants under this Government, who will have final decision-making authority for each of these areas that are covered by this fund?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: Sure. I think that was already taken on notice in relation to a question from the Chair around ministerial responsibility for the fund. So, again, I can confirm that question will be taken on notice.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: It is a slightly more specific question, given that we have found that the Ministers who are responsible for administering are not always the final decision-makers for the fund. So, if it could be taken on notice as a separate question?

Ms LUSCHWITZ: Thank you. Yes.

The CHAIR: That slightly more refined question ends the Opposition's round. I will hand over to Ms Abigail Boyd.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I am sorry, Ms Boyd. I do apologise. Just for the information of the witnesses, we are going to trespass on your time for about 10 minutes additional to what we had originally proposed because we were somewhat delayed in getting started for technical reasons. If anyone has difficulty with that, please let me know now. I will hand over to you, Ms Boyd.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I have a couple of extra questions about Westinvest to the extent that you can answer them. Perhaps I will direct it to you again, Ms Wilkie, because I would like you to take it on notice if you cannot answer. In addition to those two LGAs of concern that Mr Mookhey mentioned that were not included within the Westinvest remit, we have an additional five LGAs that have not been of concern during COVID that have been included in Westinvest. Are you able to shed any light on the rationale for including those?

Ms WILKIE: I will take that question on notice, Ms Boyd.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. Are you able to tell us what sort of up-to-date data the Treasury collects in order to work out the economic impact in those LGAs, or is it surmised from the circumstances?

Ms WILKIE: I can start answering this question and then I might hand over to Mr Walters, who is much, much closer to this. There is a range of real-time data, to the extent that real-time data exists for the economy, and then economic statistics that are taken into account—so things like mobility data, whether that is Transport for NSW data for Opal card usage or Google mobility and Apple mobility data and that sort of thing. There is credit card expenditure data that we use in terms of those real-time numbers, and then there are various other economic statistics that we get through the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS] and the consumer-in-confidence numbers that we get through various other institutions.

The problem or the issue with a lot of that data is that some of it we can get down to an LGA or sub-LGA level; a lot of it is not available at that sort of geographic level. So in terms of being able to monitor things in real time, data availability is difficult to be able to look at the intimate of what the actual impact is. It makes it difficult to look at it in anything less than really a broad State level. Mr Walters, is there anything you would like to add to that answer?

Mr WALTERS: I think that was a very comprehensive answer from Ms Wilkie. The only thing I would also add, Ms Boyd, is that we get feedback from business regularly and other groups. So we are always talking to stakeholders who may be affected. In addition to all the data that Ms Wilkie mentioned, both official Bureau of Statistics data plus bank card data plus mobility data, which are all very useful, we do get real-time business feedback as well, which gives us that real-world perspective on the published data.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. Do you get data about how many businesses are effectively closing down or will not be able to reopen once we come out of COVID?

Mr WALTERS: That tends to come more in a qualitative sense through the business feedback. The data on official business closures or insolvencies is very dated. So, as Ms Wilkie said, it is not particularly useful for regional analysis, or statewide even for that matter. A lot of that information comes from the corporate regulator, which is a national body. My simple answer is that it is more qualitative than quantitative.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Do we know how many people are engaged in the construction sector—have jobs in the construction sector—in the LGAs that are covered by Westinvest?

Ms WILKIE: We do—

Mr WALTERS: I will give a general—sorry, you go, Ms Wilkie.

Ms WILKIE: Sorry, Mr Walters. We do have that. We do have various data sources, the ABS data in terms of industries or employment, that mean that we can make calculations to work that out. But that data is dated in the sense that it is all retrospective data.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. I am just looking again at the press release in relation to Westinvest. The projects that have been identified are all construction projects of various kinds—some small scale and then of course that \$2 billion that might be reserved for larger construction projects. In your view as economists, is that the most effective use of funds in order to restimulate the economy after opening up after COVID?

Ms WILKIE: I will start and then Mr Walters might want to pick up. If you look at the types of projects that are envisaged there, we have got everything from urban spaces and schools and cultural facilities and that sort of thing. There are going to be very large parts of the economy and businesses that are going to be engaged in

that, so everything from if a park is going to be revitalised, then you are going to be engaging potentially the construction industry if you are redoing paving on footpaths and that sort of thing. But you are also going to be engaging landscaping and plant supply businesses and all of that sort of thing. If we are modernising local schools, then again, yes, the construction industry is going to be engaged but you are potentially also engaging a variety of other businesses through the various things that are going to be done in schools and that sort of thing. One of the benefits of investing in these sorts of projects where you are building is the multiplier through the economy, particularly once you start looking at the supply chain through to undertaking those sorts of investments. You do end up engaging quite a large part of the economy.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I put it to you, would you not get a more direct boost to the economy by actually putting more money in the hands of people who will then spend locally in local businesses?

Ms WILKIE: Mr Walters will be able to give a more technical answer here, but in general the multiplier for the amount of money, the amount of economic benefit that you end up getting is higher for investment than it is for consumption. So if you gave money directly to people, then they will go out and buy something. If you give it to a business, they pay workers, they pay suppliers, and so there are more interactions going on in the economy.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: But given that you have got—

Mr WALTERS: I just want—

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Sorry, go ahead.

Mr WALTERS: I was just going to add to, Ms Boyd, to Ms Wilkie's answer that totally, as Ms Wilkie said, the highest multipliers are typically in government investment, particularly in infrastructure. There are positive multipliers involved with giving people grants, so to speak, households, but the amount of money that actually gets churned through the economy, which is what we are ultimately after, depends on a whole range of factors for those households, including their propensity to spend money. Particularly high-income earners have a low propensity to spend money. Lower income earners have a higher propensity to spend money. So it is a much more complex concept than just giving people money. We know the multipliers associated with infrastructure spending are typically much, much higher than those for households.

The CHAIR: Mr Walters, we are on a unity ticket of not giving money to high-income earners.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Yes.

The CHAIR: Particularly Treasury.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: There are extreme cost-of-living pressures on people in these areas of concern, not least of all the high cost of tolls for people living in the western suburbs. Would it not be more sensible to ease the cost of living for people in those impacted areas, rather than putting money into even more construction projects?

Ms WILKIE: The multiplier effect, or the broader benefit to the economy for those two different types of expenditures, as Mr Walters has indicated, is highly dependent on circumstances. If government is investing in infrastructure in a region where that infrastructure is poor, then that is going to have an enormous benefit to the economy more broadly. To ask that, it is highly dependent on the circumstances. You know, it depends, is the answer.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Thank you. My final question is, given how little data we have on what is actually happening in those LGAs, given how dependent any recovery financing is in terms of its effectiveness on the circumstances, as you have said, do you believe that you are in the best position to be able to advise the Government that investing in construction is the best way to go at this time?

Ms WILKIE: As a policy adviser, you never have all the information you would want or that you feel you might need, and any expenditure of money there is an opportunity cost associated with that. So at this point in time, given the information that we do have both anecdotal and quantitative in terms of the impacts on western Sydney, it is appropriate for the Government to be looking at ways, as part of the economic recovery, to make sure that it makes investments into that community. As we have said, in general, economic policy advisers are generally going to prefer expenditure, given a paucity of other data, on investments, rather than consumption, because they tend to have a higher multiplier.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Boyd. Ms Wilkie, you said you were looking at some of the regional economic impacts. Do you have any data or can you provide us with any insight into how some of those regional economies, which are so tourism dependent—and I am thinking here of the North Coast, the Mid Coast and the South Coast—

how they have fared as a result not only of their own lockdowns but of border closures and the lockdown in Sydney?

Ms WILKIE: We do have some information. As Mr Walters and I have both indicated, part of this comes from the anecdotal information that we are getting and we are eagerly anticipating future data releases from the Australian Bureau of Statistics so we can start putting some degree of rigour and quantification around that. But we do have some information that is starting to point to those areas of concern. In fact, one we do know is of greatest concern is actually the fix of the Sydney central business district. That is the most highly impacted region of any in New South Wales for some of those same reasons, including tourism and visitors from outside the area. I do not have that to hand right now in terms of that level of detail. I am very happy to take that on notice to provide you with some of the information that we do have, noting that as more data releases come out over the next six months we will have a much clearer picture.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Wilkie. Is there work on foot to have a stimulus package ready to go for those tourism-dependent economies? I am particularly thinking about small and medium businesses in the regions where if they go to the wall, there is going to be that ongoing impact of economic pain with unemployment. It seems to me to be a matter of urgency. Can you give us any assurance that there is a stimulus package in the pipeline to help particularly those tourism-dependent economies?

Ms WILKIE: The business grants support that is already available is obviously available to businesses across New South Wales, if they are eligible in terms of having experienced decline. Businesses in those sorts of circumstances at the moment are already eligible for support. But in terms of the repackage that the Treasurer is putting together, notwithstanding the fact that one of my colleagues is leading that process, as Mr Walters has already indicated, there is a significant amount of work that is coming out of the economic teams in terms of trying to identify various different cohorts—whether it is geographic or industry-sector based or looking at those cohorts—

The CHAIR: [Inaudible].

Ms WILKIE: —you know, like employment-based, like younger people and that sort of thing, so that the recovery package can be targeted to the cohorts across the economy that have been disproportionately affected.

The CHAIR: Ms Wilkie, can you provide to us on notice how much has been allocated and spent under the current business support grant program and, if you can, break it down by region?

Ms WILKIE: Yes.

The CHAIR: [Inaudible].

Ms WILKIE: Yes. We will be able to do that on notice. The Service NSW website provides information on the amount of applications that have been paid out to date but it does not include that geographic information. So, yes, we will be able to take that on notice.

The CHAIR: Mr Walters, my final two questions go to you. For a stimulus package, such as the Westinvest package, to be effective, it needs to be new money, doesn't it? It cannot be rebadged or repurposed funds from other programs. Is that right?

Mr WALTERS: It depends on many, many factors, Mr Shoebridge. I would argue that, as Ms Wilkie said, there is an opportunity cost. It depends what government alternative spending options are. But typically new money would—[disorder].

The CHAIR: I am sorry, Mr Walters, you cannot just rebadge existing payments or existing investments and pretend it is a stimulus package. For a stimulus package to be real, it has to be new money, does it not?

Mr WALTERS: It depends on the multipliers, Mr Shoebridge. If it was coming off spending that had been allocated to a low multiplier project, for example, or a purpose and it is put to a higher multiplier purpose, then the same money allocated to a higher multiplier would have a stimulatory effect.

The CHAIR: What about the fact—

Mr WALTERS: [Inaudible].

The CHAIR: What about the fact that ultimately every single cent of this one way or another is going to be paid for by the people of western Sydney through tolls over the next 40 years? It is effectively a mortgage that they are paying and they will pay out to the private provider over the next 40 years. Does that fundamental underpinning impact in terms of what its economic benefits will be, if the people of western Sydney are not dupes and they understand that effectively they are going to pay for this anyhow? Is that going to have adverse impacts?

Mr WALTERS: I cannot comment specifically on the funding or whether it is through tolls or otherwise, Mr Shoebridge. I am not involved in the transactional side of the department.

The CHAIR: The only way you make money on a toll road is through tolls. So the people of western Sydney are going to be paying the purchase price one way or another, are they not, Mr Walters? You are a chief economist. You know this.

Mr WALTERS: When you drive, all users of those toll roads will pay a toll, not just those people in western Sydney. But, again, I am not involved in the specifics of this project or its funding, Mr Shoebridge. I am happy to take that question on notice but I cannot answer it for you now.

The CHAIR: What I specifically want you to take on notice is: Have you taken into account that that is a more complex interaction? If the people of western Sydney realise that they are going to be paying every cent of this anyhow, they may well choose to actually save money and put that aside for the future. That may well have a very adverse impact, might it not, which would go some way to negate the economic stimulus of the \$5 billion?

Mr WALTERS: If savings are increased or spending deferred, then in general terms, yes, the stimulatory impact could be affected. But, again, I cannot make a comment in specific reference to this project.

The CHAIR: Unfortunately, we have run out of time. I have gone a little bit over. I do thank all of you for staying on. We all appreciate the assistance you are able to give. We look forward to further assistance in the answers to questions on notice. I remind you that you have 21 days in which to provide those. Of course, as always, the secretariat will be providing you with assistance and details in that regard. So thank you to all the witnesses.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

GEORGINA HARRISSON, Secretary, Department of Education, on former affirmation

RUTH OWEN, Acting Group Deputy Secretary, School Improvement and Education Reform Group, Department of Education, on former affirmation

YVETTE CACHIA, Chief People Officer, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education, affirmed and examined

ANTHONY MANNING, Chief Executive Officer, School Infrastructure NSW, Department of Education, affirmed and examined

MURAT DIZDAR, Deputy Secretary, School Performance—South, Department of Education, on former affirmation

PAUL MARTIN, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Education Standards Authority, on former affirmation

The CHAIR: I now formally open our second panel and give a welcome to our next witnesses. Thank you all for your attendance today. There is an opportunity now, should you wish to take it, to give a brief opening statement.

Ms HARRISSON: Yes, Chair, if I may. That would be gratefully received. Can I first acknowledge that I join you from the land of the Cammeraygal people and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I appreciate the opportunity to outline the department's current priority and focus, which is the safe and secure return to school and early childhood education. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to our staff and our school communities, who through the last term have shown incredible resilience and agility in supporting their communities through this experience, and in particular those schools in south-western Sydney and western Sydney who have gone above and beyond in support of their communities through very challenging times.

The COVID pandemic and, in particular, the Delta variant, has significantly impacted life as we know it across all communities in New South Wales. The disruption, circumstances and experiences within the education sector have proven challenging and have required sustained focus. The task of living with COVID requires that that focus continues. This will be done in partnership with our students, teachers, parents and carers, who have all shown such tenacity, patience and resilience over many months now. The department's efforts have been and will continue to be guided by Health advice and the growing research and evidence base that is developing around the world as countries grapple with many of the same questions that we are experiencing here in New South Wales. We know our students learn best in the classroom and we know parents and schools need clarity after many uncertain months. This is why we are planning for a staggered return for all schools from next month under the COVID-safe conditions.

As the Committee is no doubt aware, the return-to-school plan comprises multiple measures to mitigate the risk of COVID-19 transmission. These include mandatory double doses of vaccinations for all school and preschool staff, encouraging vaccinations of students aged 12 and above, staggered start and finish times and breaks with no mixing between student cohorts, mandatory mask wearing for all school staff and high school students, and masks strongly recommended for primary school students. An audit of the ventilation and classrooms across all public schools is underway and we continue to ensure the provision of hygiene supplies and enhanced cleaning across our school sites. These measures are responsive to and tailored specifically to the New South Wales experience and context. The return-to-school plan provides for localised application that takes into account the specific and unique circumstances of our 2,200 different schools across the State in the interests of every student.

Looking forward, the challenges set by COVID-19 will be ongoing and dynamic; so, too, will be our management of the situation in schools. Our responses will not be static or fixed. We will adapt and evolve as we monitor and learn. We will respond to the evidence base and expertise as circumstances demand and as risks require. This is our new "business as usual", as we seek to re-establish a fundamental schooling normal to provide a safe environment for our students to learn and our teachers to teach. I note that we are operationalising the return-to-school plan on 25 October. We may not have all details finalised as yet but we will seek to answer the Committee's questions as thoroughly as possible. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Harrisson. Does any other witness wish to make a brief opening statement? Then I will hand over to the Opposition to commence questioning.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thanks, Chair. Can I, too, put on the record my sincere thanks to the teachers and staff in our 2,200 New South Wales schools, who have gone above and beyond during the closure period. Ms Harrisson, I note that all schools are planning to return and I note that that terminology has been that schools are planning to return from 25 October, 1 November and 8 November. What would be the criteria for any schools not to return on those dates?

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you for the question, Ms Houssos. We will be taking Health advice leading up to the return to school on those areas that can return. As we have said, we are planning for all schools to return. We are very strongly hopeful that is the case and that we are able to proceed on that basis, but we will continue to be led by Health advice on which areas that will apply to at the time.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: There was a discussion in budget estimates that the United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] guidelines are 50 cases per 100,000 would be used. Is that still being considered?

Ms HARRISSON: That is definitely being considered. I think it is important that as we look around the situation that our schools are reopening in, one of the things we are trying to make sure we do is maintain world-class standards. We will have some of the highest vaccination rates in the community at the point students are returning. We will have relatively, by global standards, low case numbers statewide. But obviously when we have particular risks in particular areas, we need to make sure that we are responding to those. And so, yes, the CDC level remains a consideration.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Will that consideration be announced as part of the announcement in the first week of October?

Ms HARRISSON: That will be a matter for Government in the first week of October and subject to decision-making by crisis cabinet.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: In terms of consideration about the caseload, are you at the moment considering that for specific local government areas or are you looking at school districts? What is the level of community transmission that you are looking at?

Ms HARRISSON: We are continuing to be in dialogue with NSW Health around the appropriate settings. It would not be appropriate for me to pre-empt what those discussions might end up with. But certainly we are looking at the case numbers and communities and we will continue to work with NSW Health to get to a final position.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: The crucial question is whether students will be able to return to school according to the publicly announced timetable. Parents, teachers and students are looking for clarity. Schools within the same local government area are receiving conflicting information about whether they are going to return or they are not going to return. You do understand that this is an incredibly important piece of information to share with the public.

Ms HARRISSON: Yes, Ms Houssos. We absolutely understand the demand and necessity for clarity in our school communities. We are, however, working through an evolving situation with a global pandemic, and so we are making decisions on the best advice that we have at the time and in the most timely way that we can to support the safe return to school. So I absolutely understand the frustration and uncertainty that may cause, but I am also sure the community will appreciate the need for us to respond to the settings as they are at the time we are making those decisions.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: There are the CDC guidelines. Are you considering any other international guidelines?

Ms HARRISSON: That is the main one that we are considering at this stage, alongside the other community areas that we have outlined already, including significantly high rates of vaccination in the adult population across the State as well as mandated vaccinations of staff and the other layers of mitigation strategies we have in place to keep our schools safe.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Are you able to give us any insight into what else will be announced in the first week of October and what other information will be provided?

Ms HARRISSON: No. I am not able to give—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: [Inaudible].

Ms HARRISSON: I am not able to pre-empt Government decisions and announcements for the first week of October.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Given that schools are now likely to return weeks after pubs, gyms, hairdressers and nail salons reopen, have you considered bringing forward the return-to-school date?

Ms HARRISSON: We picked a date in particular to allow our schools to plan for the return across areas where they have been learning from home for an extended period. Of course, we are seeing lots of dynamic returns to school and returns to learning from home around other parts of the State at the moment and we respond to those

as we need, but we continue to plan for the twenty-fifth. We chose that date, at the time, with some view of vaccination rates and where that would lead to. We wanted to make sure that we would have those high vaccination rates in our communities so that our students who are unable to be vaccinated—those under 12 in particular—would return to school in the safest environment possible.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: How many teachers are vaccinated as at today's date?

Ms HARRISSON: I can ask Ms Cachia to provide some details of our understanding of staff vaccinations at this stage.

Ms CACHIA: I would like to acknowledge that I am on Darug land today. The answer, I suppose, in terms of a definitive number is not going to be established until we are returning and we collect that information. However, as the secretary pointed out, we have insights through our survey. We have conducted that survey twice. On the last occasion, I mentioned the statistics there around that. I can advise that the current vaccination status as at 17 September is that 79 per cent of respondents had had at least one COVID-19 vaccination and 56 per cent of respondents had had two COVID-19 vaccine doses. We are predicting that that is going to continue, so the vast bulk of our workforce we are predicting will be fully vaccinated.

Ms HARRISSON: Ms Houssos, if I could just add to that answer, we surveyed on the first occasion and had approximately 70,000 responses and on this occasion we had around 40,000 to 50,000 responses.¹ So obviously the representation of the sample will have changed over time as different members of our staff have chosen to respond to a voluntary survey. We will be working with schools from the start of next term to ensure they can start to get an insight into their own workforce planning, to understand the local context and the local vaccination rates in their staff. But we are also then working on the kind of system-level capture of that information so that we can store it and use it as we will need to moving forward.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Is 8 November the deadline to be double vaccinated? Is that correct?

Ms HARRISSON: Ms Cachia, would you like [audio malfunction] details [audio malfunction]?

Ms CACHIA: Sorry, Secretary. Yes, under a proposed public health order—and again this has not been published yet—my understanding is that that is the indicative date, 8 November.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: What arrangements are in place for teachers who are not vaccinated by that deadline, Ms Harrison?

Ms HARRISSON: Obviously we are working closely with our staff, with our principals and with their representatives around how we manage our staff leading up to that time. Our strong position here, as will be outlined in a public health order, is that our staff need to be vaccinated. For those who are unwilling to be vaccinated, we will need to look at our ability to continue to support their employment in a school-based setting. For those who are unable to, because of medical exemptions, we will continue to support them and ensure that their safety is maintained by the level of vaccinated staff around them, including by looking at alternative duties where appropriate. Beyond that we will be encouraging every staff member to get vaccinated and be able to return to work fully in the classroom with their students on 25 October and beyond.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Will unvaccinated teachers continue to have their positions and continue to be paid after 8 November?

Ms HARRISSON: Depending on the—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Unvaccinated by choice.

Ms HARRISSON: Depending on the individual circumstances—and I think there are a variety of reasons why someone might choose not to be vaccinated, and so it will be on a case-by-case basis. We are certainly intending to take a reasonable and managed approach to our support of staff. Where it is appropriate, they may be able to access leave provisions. Where that is not available, then we will need to look at other requirements. It will be a requirement of employment with us in the longer term and once that public health order comes into effect. Ms Cachia can provide some further information.

Ms CACHIA: Ms Houssos, would you like me to provide any further information?

¹ In [correspondence](#) received 22 October 2021, the Hon Sarah Mitchell MLC, Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning, requested a correction to the evidence by replacing the number "70,000" with the number "53,000".

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Yes, just briefly.

Ms CACHIA: Sure. As the secretary outlined there are going to be numerous reasons why somebody may not be vaccinated by the eighth. That could include any kind of issue relating to supply. So they may have an appointment for 20 November for their second vaccination. As the secretary outlined we are going to be reasonable about this and look at those issues on a case-by-case basis. But as the secretary outlined we have been informing our workforce for some time and it will be outlined in the public health order that it is an expectation—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Okay, thanks, Ms Cachia, I think that is helpful enough. I would like to move on to a new area. Ms Harrison, the Victorian Government has announced a \$190 million package to improve ventilation and outdoor learning. How much is the New South Wales Government allocating for similar measures?

Ms HARRISSON: [Inaudible].

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You are on mute, Ms Harrison.

Ms HARRISSON: My apologies. We note the Victorian announcement yesterday for some very specific and targeted responses to some high-risk areas in schools. We are undergoing our own evaluation of our requirements for ventilation. The advice remains that fresh air is the best form of ventilation and therefore the primary source of ventilation will be through enabling fresh air to enter our classrooms through opening windows and doors. Mr Manning can provide some further details. But before I hand to Mr Manning I would say that we are more interested in ensuring the safety than looking at the amount of money that we are spending. We are focused on making sure the environment is safe and if that requires investment we will, of course, be going and asking the Government for the funding to support that investment.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Before we go to Mr Manning, Ms Harrison, you said you have advice. Is that advice from NSW Health?

Ms HARRISSON: We have advice and have been continuing to work with NSW Health. We are also seeking our own independent advice around ventilation and Mr Manning can provide you with some further information.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Manning?

Mr MANNING: The progress is going well through the audit of our existing portfolio. As of today we are about 50 per cent through the portfolio. More than 74,000 spaces have been inspected and that is more than 300,000 windows, very nearly 100,000 fans and getting close to 9,000 extractor fans that have been inspected as part of that process. We are now working through rectification of any of those that we have found to be non-operational, to ensure that they can be brought on stream as quickly as we possibly can. We will continue to roll through the rest of the audit over the next few days so we can make sure all the rectification works are done and we have a complete picture and assessment of the natural ventilation processes that we can provide to our schools.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: When did that audit commence, Mr Manning?

Mr MANNING: We started it probably two weeks ago and got up to speed at least a week ago. Remember we hold quite a lot of data in our system on schools and windows. Our facilities management contractors are tasked with knowing a whole bunch of information. But we found in the past we really need to go out and resurvey for specific elements and so this is the piece we have been doing now. Getting back out, resurveying and re-validating the information that we have got to make sure that we have got a wholly accurate picture of the portfolio.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Manning, the new surveys, the new inspection—do you call it an audit? Is that correct?

Mr MANNING: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: The audit process of classrooms began two weeks ago. Is that correct?

Mr MANNING: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: And you have done 50 per cent so far and you expect to do the remaining 50 per cent in the next two weeks?

Mr MANNING: We think we will have the survey finished before the end of next week. That is our target.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: By the end of next week.

Mr MANNING: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: What is the process of auditing classrooms?

Mr MANNING: Whether it is a representative from our regional asset management office or whether it is a representative from our facilities management contractor, there is a visual inspection and, as part of that visual inspection, we look for windows and the windows that open, we look for internal fans and make sure that they are functioning and we are looking at extract fans as well. We are trying to make sure that we have a complete picture of both the natural and the mechanical ventilation systems that we have, test to ensure that they are operational and, if they are not operational, we instruct through our facilities management contractor for them to be made operational almost immediately. As we roll through we issue instructions for work to be carried out. So we are not waiting to get to the end of the audit to instruct the work. It is happening now and rolling through right now.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So you will be auditing every single classroom. Is that correct?

Mr MANNING: Our intent is to get into every single classroom. Whilst we hold data, we really need it to be visually inspected to be relied upon.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Minister Mitchell has said that the review will ensure that all windows operate efficiently. What is the benchmark for operating efficiently?

Mr MANNING: The vast majority of our windows are manual, so we will make sure that they operate easily and they operate fully—open fully.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: They open fully? They need to be able to open fully to conform to your audit?

Mr MANNING: Absolutely, yes. That is our intent—to make sure they can open fully so we get the maximum ventilation through that space.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: We have been told that some windows only open 10 to 15 per cent. Would that be enough?

Mr MANNING: Again, it depends on the number of windows in a classroom. As part of the analysis we are doing, we will be looking at the volume of openable windows in a classroom and that way we can work through a calculation of the fresh air ventilation that works its way through. Some windows have restrictors on them and do not open fully but that is part of the calculations we are working our way through to ensure we can get the right ventilation into classrooms.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Some architectural experts have said that you cannot tell from just looking at a room. Are you doing any actual monitoring of CO2 levels in the classrooms?

Mr MANNING: Yes, our asset management systems are quite sophisticated. We hold information on sizes of rooms, doors and a whole range of other things, so we are able to do those calculations. The visual inspection is about ensuring that those things are functioning and, where they are not functioning, we will repair them. But we are actually able to look at classroom sizes across the estate with the detailed plans that we hold across all our schools. That is something that our asset management teams are updating on a regular basis so we understand exactly what a learning space looks like and how it is allocated, because actually it forms part of the calculation of the capacity of the school. That then allows us to make some calculations around airflows and how they work to ensure that we are able to be comfortable around the operation of those. Part of that is then looking at the windows and how far they open, and that gives us the openable area of window to understand the ventilation flowthrough.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: But, with respect, Mr Manning, you did not answer my question, which is: Is there any use of electronic devices to monitor current CO2 levels within classrooms as part of your inspections?

Mr MANNING: As part of the audit, no, there is not.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So the audit is a visual inspection of how the classroom is functioning.

Mr MANNING: It is a visual inspection and a calculation. Until the classroom has people in it, the CO2 monitoring does not recognise the people in the room, so you need to do it through a calculation process rather than by monitoring at this stage.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Going forward, will the monitoring include electronic monitoring of CO2 levels once students and staff return?

Mr MANNING: At the moment we are working through the audit. We are working through the advice and the calculations. Depending on the volume of air and the openable windows, there will be more than enough air changes and, therefore, at the moment there is no advice around needing to monitor that. We will be comfortable around the number of air changes going through the room to be clear that it would clear the room. That is the work that we are doing at the moment as part of that audit process.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Just to be clear, there is no ongoing monitoring of what happens when students and staff return. Is that accurate?

Mr MANNING: At this stage of the audit we are going through doing a check of what works and what does not work. We are getting advice about the airflow and, once we have that audit and that full picture and we have that advice, we will take the next steps as we need to.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: How many fans or exhaust fans were found to be broken as part of the audit?

Mr MANNING: So far, of the 93,000 fans inspected, nearly 4,000 were found to not be working and, of the close to 9,000 extractor fans that have been inspected so far, a little over 1,100 have been found to not be working.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Sorry, it was 9,000 extractor fans and 1,100 were not working?

Mr MANNING: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: How many of the classrooms have an air-conditioning or a heating system installed?

Mr MANNING: The answer to the question depends on the systems that you are talking about. A lot of the systems that have been installed in schools, funded through P&C and the like, are actually recirculatory air systems. So they do not add any fresh air into the room. All they do is continue to recirculate the air that is within the room. The cooler classrooms system that we have been rolling out—there are about 4,300 learning spaces that the system has been installed into. As part of that system we automate fresh air coming into classrooms as part of that process. But a lot of the schools where the split systems have been put in—they do not bring in external air. You would still need to open a window to bring fresh air in as part of that and then the system would temper the air that is in the room.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Manning, how many of those classrooms have either a cooler classrooms installed air-conditioning or air-conditioning that has been installed by the P&C.

Mr MANNING: As I said, it is just a shade under 4,300 classrooms that have been rolled out through the cooler classrooms system. We do not hold accurate records necessarily on how many classrooms the P&C have funded, for often they happen without us acknowledging. I can look into our asset management system. We might have to take that question on notice.

The CHAIR: Ms Houssos, I am sure we will come back to this in a bit but the initial Opposition round has expired. Ms Harrison, you would have seen yesterday's announcement from the Victorian Government of \$190 million to be spent on ventilation in Victorian schools. Did you see that announcement?

Ms HARRISSON: We have seen that announcement, yes.

The CHAIR: Given Victoria has decided that ventilation is one of the three key pillars to getting schools back safely and is investing \$190 million just on that pillar, can you advise us how much has been spent by the New South Wales Government on ventilation?

Ms HARRISSON: I think Ms Houssos asked a similar question, Mr Shoebridge. We are more concerned about the safety in our classrooms as they are than we are the amount of money that we might need to spend. If money is required and if new investment is required we will, of course, take that into consideration. But our focus at the minute is ensuring that the natural ventilation, which we have been advised is the most effective solution, is accessible in as many of our learning spaces as possible and where it is not we will have alternative solutions in place. Mr Manning has some further detail on the Victorian announcement and our consideration of it here in New South Wales and can provide some further information.

The CHAIR: Before we go to Mr Manning—and I assure you we will go there—the reason Victoria has come up with this package now is that it has completed a detailed audit of its classrooms, it knows what needs

to be spent to keep the air circulating and it has completed its audit some weeks ago. Why is the New South Wales Department of Education only now in the middle of an audit, given Victoria was miles ahead?

Ms HARRISSON: I do not have details on the Victorian audit or the process that they have gone through and certainly have had no advice in relation to the work they may or may not have done in leading up to their announcement. Mr Manning might have further information on that. We have been working closely with our interstate partners on these issues as they develop and I am sure Mr Manning can provide you with some further information.

The CHAIR: Before we go there, Ms Harrisson, how can you have no knowledge about what Victoria is doing and be working at the same time closely with interstate jurisdictions?

Ms HARRISSON: As—

The CHAIR: Let me finish. Those two statements seem directly contradictory. You say you have a close working relationship with the Victorian officials. Do you know when they completed their audit, for example?

Ms HARRISSON: As I indicated, Mr Shoebridge, Mr Manning can provide you with some further information on that.

The CHAIR: Mr Manning?

Mr MANNING: We note Victoria's announcement yesterday but also note that they are also relying very heavily on natural ventilation into classrooms. My team have had conversations with their counterparts in Victoria but I do not have any information about them sharing with us the extent of their audit or the fact they had that audit completed. We were talking to them about what options they were thinking of and looking at and sharing information about where we were in terms of strategy. But I note that the Victorian commitment again relies very heavily on the use of natural ventilation within their schools, as does ours, and as I have said before the audit is well underway—well in progress—and will be completed very shortly and we will be able to act on that information as we have it. But we need to be sure that it is accurate and right.

The CHAIR: Mr Manning, how many air purification devices have been sourced by the Department of Education and are ready to be put in New South Wales school classrooms and common areas? How many?

Mr MANNING: As we have said before, we are working through the audit and we are getting advice from the audit in terms of natural ventilation. At that point we will be able to make decisions about the specification of the systems we need to order and how many we will need to have. We have been in dialogue with a number of suppliers of systems in readiness for a procurement process if we need to do one, given the time frames. At this stage we need to wait for the audits to be completed, wait for the airflow measurements to come through and be comfortable and receive the advice we are looking for in terms of the specification of the units we need to order.

The CHAIR: Mr Manning, would a shorter answer to my question about how many have been sourced—would a shorter answer be zero?

Mr MANNING: As I have said, we are waiting for the results of the audit—

The CHAIR: I asked for a number, Mr Manning, and I am asking you if the answer is zero.

Mr MANNING: As at this point in time we are waiting for the audit to be completed at which point we will be able to understand how many we need and we will go through that process at that point in time.

The CHAIR: Mr Manning, I am really going to ask you to answer my question. I am going to ask you again, is the answer zero? As we are here today, is the answer zero?

Mr MANNING: At this point in time, as I say, we have not placed any orders for any purification systems. The audits are underway—

The CHAIR: No, Mr Manning—

Mr MANNING: I have answered the question.

The CHAIR: I am asking the number.

Mr MANNING: I have told you, at this point in time—

The CHAIR: Mr Manning, please wait a second. I am asking you the number. If the number is 100, tell us it is 100. If it is 51,000, tell us it is 51,000. But if it is nought, please tell us it is nought. What is the answer?

Mr MANNING: In the last answer I confirmed we have as yet not ordered any purification systems. We are, pending the results of the audit, defining the specification of the systems we will need and should we need any we will then get into the procurement process. In readiness for that we have been talking to a number of suppliers to ensure that there are stocks available, and we will continue to work our way through that. But until we have finished the audit—until we have a clear specification of what we need to order—we will move on from that point forward.

The CHAIR: Mr Manning, you only commenced the audit last week. Victoria is so far ahead. It has not sourced nought; it has sought 51,000 air purifiers to go into its classrooms. And at the same point in time, even though we are further down the curve of the pandemic, the New South Wales Department of Education has not ordered a single one. That sounds to me like you have dropped the ball here. Ms Harrison?

Ms HARRISSON: Mr Shoebridge, I can see the elements of your argument but I do not accept them. It is important that we know what we need and what the specifications are of any air purifiers we would need. There are particular particle sizes that are required to be filtered in order for an air purification system to be beneficial. There is a particular scale of air purification that would be required in particular classrooms if natural ventilation cannot be secured and be effective, and we are not going to go and pre-order solutions here that may not be effective in our settings. We are doing the thorough work. We are auditing every single learning space in the State—that is 156,000 spaces that we are auditing. But we are, of course, using the school holiday period to minimise the disruption on our schools' operations to make sure that we have got all the information, which is why we will be accelerating the process through the school holidays.

The CHAIR: Ms Harrison, there has not been anyone at a Sydney school for months and months. You have not had to wait for school holidays. You could have had access to empty classrooms for months and months. The idea that you are waiting for the school holidays is plain nonsense, is it not?

Ms HARRISSON: I do not accept the premise of your question. We have had staff across Greater Sydney and across regional New South Wales—we have had people on school sites and we have wanted to minimise additional people going into school sites to keep those students who are attending school as safe as possible. We are undertaking the audit as Mr Manning has made very clear. That audit will give us the intelligence, information and evidence we need to ensure that the solutions we provide for our schools work. I think it is really important for the Committee and for our parents and communities in New South Wales to know we are putting mitigation strategies in place at all levels, a layered approach, starting with high levels of vaccines in the community, mandated vaccines in our schools—

The CHAIR: Ms Harrison, it is not an opportunity—stop. We have limited time. It is not an opportunity to go beyond the question that has been asked to you. We really have to keep it focused on answering the questions. Ms Harrison, you would be aware that there are many, many schools which are more than one storey and have classrooms on second, third and higher storeys. You would be aware of that?

Ms HARRISSON: Yes, Mr Shoebridge.

The CHAIR: You would also be aware of occupational health and safety [OH&S] requirements that mean that those windows in those classrooms cannot open more than five or a maximum 10 centimetres because of OH&S safety issues. And if you are not aware of that, I am sure Mr Manning is.

Ms HARRISSON: I am aware of that, Mr Shoebridge, and I think we canvassed some of those issues in the questioning from Ms Houssos as well, so, yes.

The CHAIR: Given that those windows cannot be fully opened, how can you give any kind of commitment that you will be able to get fresh air into classrooms where you cannot open the windows more than five centimetres? These are really practical issues. It is not me asking; it is parents asking, it is students asking. These are really practical issues and they want practical answers. Mr Manning, what is the answer?

Mr MANNING: Part of the reason why we are doing the audit is so we can understand. There are mitigation strategies that we can put in place including, as we have got in some locations, mesh on windows so that actually you can open the window without there being a risk of falling. There are a number of mitigation measures we can work our way through. We need to complete the visual inspection so we can understand what we need to put into place to maximise the natural ventilation, and that is the work that we are doing and we will continue to do. Once we have that picture we will be able to move on that and implement what we need to do.

The CHAIR: Mr Manning, when you drill down into it, it is so much more complicated than just simply opening windows, is it not? It is so much more complicated than that.

Mr MANNING: As I said, once the audit is complete we will have a complete picture across the portfolio and we will be able to implement the strategies that we need to. As I said, the advice universally is to maximise the natural ventilation and that is the strategy that we are working our way through.

The CHAIR: What do you say to a parent who contacted me just this morning and said, "My child is about to go back to a school in Penrith where it is likely to get to the mid-40s in summer and the department's only answer is to open up all the windows and destroy any kind of cool in that classroom. How is that going to be a safe learning environment?" That is a question a parent asked me just this morning.

Ms HARRISSON: Mr Shoebridge, firstly, the answer is that ventilation is only one part of our response here. We cannot look at the layers of mitigation around transmission in isolation of one another. They work together to minimise the transmission risk. In that classroom they will have a fully-vaccinated teacher. In that classroom, if it is a high school student, they will be wearing masks indoors, as will their teachers. In that classroom the windows will be open as far as they are able and we will have sourced the appropriate solutions for that learning space. So I would assure that parent that we are doing everything that we can to ensure our schools are safe for the return of our students from 25 October.

The CHAIR: In that classroom, if it has a reverse-cycle air-conditioning system provided by the P&C at huge cost to the local community, will there be a high-efficiency particulate air [HEPA] filter on that to filter the air and provide a level of additional safety? Will that be provided?

Ms HARRISSON: It will obviously depend on the specifics of that classroom. In order for the HEPA filters to be the appropriate HEPA filters and the appropriate air-conditioning system, we will need to work through all of those, which is why, as Mr Manning has said I think repeatedly in answers to questions, we are completing the audit. Once we have completed the audit we will have the information about what solutions we will put in place.

The CHAIR: Is there a commitment to install HEPA filters on all air-conditioning systems to provide that additional layer of safety? It is a pretty simple question. Is there that commitment right now?

Ms HARRISSON: There is a commitment to ensure that our learning spaces have the appropriate levels of ventilation that will assist as one of the strategies to minimise the transmission of COVID—

The CHAIR: Ms Harrisson, you know that is not an answer to my question, so if you could answer my question. If the answer is you cannot say, tell us you cannot say, but please do not try to just defer it like that.

Ms HARRISSON: Well, Mr Shoebridge, I think the answer is important. We will ensure that there is the appropriate level of ventilation, which all of the experts tell us is the appropriate thing to do. I understand the Committee would like, or potentially be looking for, us to do more than that but I think it is important—

The CHAIR: Ms Harrisson, all I am asking for now is a very simple thing. I am only asking for a very simple thing. Will you answer my question?

Ms HARRISSON: It will depend—

The CHAIR: No, let me put it to you again so it is unambiguous. Is there a commitment to put HEPA filters on all recycled air-conditioning systems that are going to be used in New South Wales public schools? Is there that very clear commitment?

Ms HARRISSON: Because there is not one air-conditioning system or unit in use in New South Wales public schools, I am unable to give you a clear answer to that question. Our audit is underway. When our audit is complete we will understand the circumstances in every classroom across the State, in the 156,000 learning spaces that we have to ensure that they are safe.

The CHAIR: Could I ask you about ensuring that communal areas in schools are safe. Is the audit including communal areas and how are you going to test for the air circulation in communal areas, Mr Manning?

Mr MANNING: The audit is of all of our spaces, not just learning spaces. Part of that will be looking at those communal spaces. As the secretary has said, there are a range of strategies including staggering start and finishing times in terms of use of those spaces, and we will be able to provide schools with advice about how those spaces can be used along with how we maximise the ventilation that is available to us in those spaces. Some of the advice that exists out there has been around purging air—actually leaving spaces open and available overnight so we can vent spaces, leaving things on running for longer than school hours would normally be so, again, we can purge. All those things will be things we will be looking at as part of our strategy once we have got the audit complete and we have got a complete picture of the portfolio and the challenge.

The CHAIR: Will the audit be publicly available and will it be given promptly to critical stakeholders including the Teachers Federation?

Mr MANNING: I think we have got to wait until we get to the end of the audit but I see no reason why we would not be sharing that information with our stakeholders as part of our strategy to make sure that schools are safe and people can understand it.

The CHAIR: Do I get that as a commitment—that it will be promptly shared with the Teachers Federation?

Mr MANNING: All of the activities that we are doing are in line with the direct request of the Teachers Federation.

The CHAIR: Mr Manning, you seem to be able to do it. You seem—

Mr MANNING: We are happy to share the information with our stakeholders so they can be comfortable that the spaces are safe.

The CHAIR: I appreciate that. I think it is a good commitment, Mr Manning, and I appreciate it. Ms Harrison, how many current vacancies are there for teachers across New South Wales? I think the workforce is about 74,000. Last time I looked there were at least 1,100 vacancies. Is that right?

Ms HARRISSON: Ms Cachia can provide you with some details on that. I would note that for the scale of our workforce our vacancy rate is incredibly low. For an organisation of our size that is an exceptional outcome and something that we continue—and it would be reasonable for us obviously to have vacancies due to a variety of reasons across our workforce. But Ms Cachia can give you the specific details.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Cachia, and I have also noticed the recruitment ads where you have been trying to fill some of those gaps in the workforce. So, Ms Cachia, could you tell us the numbers in the current workforce, the current vacancy and how you are going filling the recruitment gap?

Ms CACHIA: I will have to take the number as at today on notice and provide that to the Committee but, as the secretary said, it is a reasonably small cohort, given the size of our workforce. It is between 1 per cent and 2 per cent. You are quite right, Mr Shoebridge, in saying that we are undergoing an advertising campaign, as we always do in a department with a workforce of our size. We use a lot of different channels to advertise for various roles for both casual, temporary and full-time teachers.

The CHAIR: It is about 1,100. Would that be the rough ballpark figure for the number of current vacancies?

Ms CACHIA: I cannot attest right at this minute to that specific number but it sounds roughly in the ballpark, yes, Mr Shoebridge.

The CHAIR: Ms Cachia, with your sort of employment hat on, have you had an assessment of how many additional teachers will not be able to be at work and teaching after 8 November because they are unvaccinated?

Ms CACHIA: Sorry, Mr Shoebridge, because they are unvaccinated?

The CHAIR: Correct.

Ms CACHIA: I guess unpacking that question, there are a couple of reasons why a teacher would be unvaccinated but going to your question—

The CHAIR: I am just asking about the ones who cannot be in the classroom, cannot be teaching—I do not really care why they are not vaccinated—because they are not vaccinated.

Ms CACHIA: Sure. At the moment, as we said earlier, there has been a vaccination survey and that is giving us our preliminary data. It will not be until schools go back to school that we collect that data and obviously at the moment individual principals, as Murat Dizdar would attest, are being told indicatively whether or not there are teachers who are concerned about meeting that time line in terms of vaccination for a variety of reasons, whether it is a medical contraindication or whether it is a firm choice not to get vaccinated regardless.

The CHAIR: Or it is the inability to access the second dose, for example.

Ms CACHIA: If that is the case, when we get firm data, as we said earlier in a previous question, we will be assessing those on a case-by-case basis and will be taking, of course, a reasonable approach where there is an inability to find access to a vaccination supply.

The CHAIR: But, Ms Cachia, it would be an heroic achievement for the teaching profession if they got to anything like 90 per cent double vaccination rates by 8 November, which means when schools are returning, the HSC is on and schools are full, there is going to be at least a 10 per cent vacancy rate in teachers. How are you planning for that? How are you going to respond to that because that is going to happen really, really quickly and it is going to have a huge impact on schools across the State. How are you planning for this?

Ms CACHIA: We are planning for it by looking at the various workforce models that we always utilise when there is a gap in the workforce. As you can imagine in a workforce of our size we never fill every single role because every single day there are new vacancies being created in the system. The answer to your question—

The CHAIR: The date 8 November is not going to be like any single day; 8 November is going to be an extraordinary moment.

Ms CACHIA: Yes, it will, Mr Shoebridge. We understand that and we are, as I said, planning for that eventuality. We cannot suppose that it is 10 per cent. We think that those teachers who have a medical contraindication will be low. Those teachers—we will be working with them on a case-by-case basis to find alternative duties for them. We do not have firm numbers at this stage of those teachers who will evidence an indication not to receive a vaccination. There will be a cohort as well who, as you said before, will not be able to get supply. So it is very difficult to give you a firm number at this point because of the various cohorts of individual staff members who are going to be required to be vaccinated by that date.

The CHAIR: I am sure we will come back to this but on my short numbers it is over 7,000 teachers. The Opposition.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I wanted to come back to the audits of classrooms. Mr Manning, just to confirm that your visual assessments of classrooms are not actually assessing whether there is a recirculating air-conditioning unit that has been installed by the P&C. Is that correct?

Mr MANNING: No. As part of our inspection we will record those things as well.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You are recording those. So you do have a record.

Mr MANNING: Yes, we will do. The system records a number but we find that over time schools have been adding to them themselves without engaging the asset management teams. So from time to time we will find new ones added that we were not aware of and as we find them we will add them to our systems so we can be sure we know they are there. So we should have a pretty complete picture and we will sweep that up as part of the end of this audit process.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Manning, let me just get some figures here. You said you have done 70,000 classrooms. Is that correct?

Mr MANNING: We have done 70,000 spaces of the more than 150,000 we need to do—just shy of 50 per cent.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: So less than 50 per cent. Yes, that is right. Ms Harrison just said there are 156,000 that you are surveying?

Mr MANNING: Yes—spaces. Yes, absolutely. That number was as of yesterday and we think we are getting close to 7 or 8 per cent a day in terms of the volume of the portfolio that we are able to get out, inspect and check.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Perhaps you can provide this on notice for us. Of those 70,000 classrooms that have been assessed, how many of them have air-conditioning units in them?

Mr MANNING: By air-conditioning systems you mean recirculating air-conditioning systems?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Yes, that is correct—recirculating, cooler classrooms, any form of air-conditioning.

Mr MANNING: Sure. We can interrogate our asset management system, yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, what is going to happen if the windows cannot be opened? What is going to happen if, as is predicted, bushfires are likely during spring or it is raining or there is a reason that the windows cannot be opened. What is the alternative plan?

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you for the question. Mr Manning can provide further details on our plans around our assets. We are looking at the overall ventilation and the layers of mitigation that we have in place. I understand the Committee's line of questioning here. Those layers of mitigation are up there with the world

standards of mitigation strategies across schools—some of the most stringent requirements placed in and around schools for their return. But Mr Manning can provide some further information on your specific question.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, I might come to Mr Manning in a moment but you are saying that these are the best standards in terms of worldwide standards. Students in Victoria, the United States of America and the United Kingdom will all have their air being filtered through HEPA air filters. These are things that are in high demand and yet New South Wales has not ordered a single one?

Ms HARRISSON: I indicated they were in line with world standards. In not all of those settings are students required to wear masks, for example, and not in all of those settings are teachers mandated to have vaccination. So it is important that we look at the whole. But I understand your question. I think Mr Manning has covered this ground substantially. We are completing an audit. If that audit shows we need additional support for ventilation in our classrooms, then we will look into providing it. Of course we will. Our priority here is the safety of our staff and students. We are not looking to short-change them. We are looking to do the thorough analysis to understand the situation in each of our spaces and to support the local solutions to those local contexts. That is what we are attempting to do here. Mr Manning can provide some specifics around the weather and bushfires.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Before I go to Mr Manning, Ms Harrison, you were part of the announcement five weeks ago that students would return to school, and yet it took three further weeks before you even started the assessment of how safe classrooms would be. What has your department been doing for this entire term to actually allow classrooms to be safe for our children to return?

Ms HARRISSON: I do not accept the premise of the question. In the development of the return-to-school plan we continued and have continued—we worked with and have continued to work with NSW Health on the best advice available to us to ensure the safe return of our students. That is why we have the layers of mitigation in place that I have laid out for the Committee. We have then, as indications from around the world and other States have indicated, continued to look at other areas we can improve this situation moving forward. So Mr Manning has commenced the audit of our learning spaces and our other spaces in schools. We want to make sure we have the right information. We want to make sure we are basing our decisions on the facts and on the situations in each of our schools. We have over 2,200 of them. They are all different. The learning spaces are of different sizes. As we have indicated, depending on the number of floors, the windows are of different sizes, shapes and of opening variations. We have to account for all of those things, and so we are doing that thoroughly and consistently and we will—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thank you Ms Harrison, let us move to Mr Manning and find out about what happens when bushfires are raging.

Mr MANNING: As part of the audit which we are doing, which is looking at kind of the extent of opening windows we have in classrooms and our ability to operate them, it includes mechanical ventilation within the school spaces as well. So you will be aware that a lot of classrooms have at least one fan, maybe two fans, on the ceiling as part of distributing air. We will also be getting an understanding of kind of where the opening windows are because in many cases, particularly in a rain situation, we have got significant eaves. So windows with a top opening can be left open without any of the rain coming into the building. We are able to operate those, and quite often those windows are open anyway, even when it is raining, because that is how classrooms are ventilated, and they will continue to be ventilated that way.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Manning, let me draw you to the crucial part of the question. In October, and particularly in November and December, we do not usually expect that there will be a lot of rain but it is likely. The predictions are that bushfires are more likely in spring. What will be in place for classrooms if they are unable to open their windows because of the air quality outside?

Mr MANNING: If we look at the last bushfire season we had—and most interaction we have with bushfire situations is actually back-burning. Our schools work very closely with the Rural Fire Service [RFS] around back-burning, wind direction and a whole range of others to make sure our schools are protected. In the event of major bushfires, we obviously act very quickly. We work with the RFS around locations of schools that are impacted either by a risk from the fire itself or the smoke. In some cases, as we saw in the last bushfire season there were days when we were not able to operate schools because of the extent of the smoke. Our schools are naturally ventilated and that is how they have always worked, and so that is an issue regardless of that—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Mr Manning, you are not answering my question. If we see widespread bushfires and poor air quality, like we did at the end of 2019, right across the Sydney Basin, what is going to happen to our schools if they are forced to close their windows and doors?

Ms HARRISSON: Ms Houssos, we will make a risk assessment of individual schools at that time in relation to the COVID risk and the bushfire risk and we will make decisions about the way they are going to

operate in that environment, based on the advice at the time. That may include, for some schools that we have to revert to learning from home for a short period of time. If that is what is required to keep our students safe, that is what we will do. It is what we do now if we have a confirmed case for COVID in a school. We move to learning from home briefly while we complete contact tracing and the like. We are going to be in a dynamic situation and an evolving situation. Of course we will monitor bushfire impacts and the requirements for ventilation and how those work together—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, my time is limited. I am going to stop you there. You are saying that if there are bushfires, our children will have to return to home learning because at the moment you are not purchasing air filters, you are relying solely on opening windows. If, as likely happens in the Australian summer, there are bushfires and there is poor air quality, our students will have to return to learning from home?

Ms HARRISSON: Firstly, I am not sure that is exactly what I said, but I am happy to clarify. If we require in order to keep our students safe due to a bushfire or a COVID outbreak or a combination of both, then we will of course revert to learning from home for the safety of our students, in situations that require it only. Where we are working on ventilation is to complete the audit and then make sure that we have the suitable provisions in place to support our schools. These two risks are running parallel for us. I think it is important that we are conscious about the way we are managing those risks but we do not conflate issues unnecessarily in relation to those two issues.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: This is not conflating issues, Ms Harrison. This is predicting what is likely to happen in an Australian summer, particularly across Sydney. We have seen this happen frequently, even over the most recent years, and your planning for schools is simply that we will open windows. Children are returning to school during this peak bushfire season and you have no other mitigation factors in place?

Ms HARRISSON: I think, as we have said in previous answers, we are completing an audit for ventilation requirements and needs in each of our spaces—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, I am going to move on. Can I just ask one final question?

Ms HARRISSON: I think it is really important. If we are going to be asked questions, Chair, it would be good if we could provide an answer. I understand members are short of time—

The CHAIR: If Ms Harrison has something fresh to add—and it appears to me that Ms Harrison does have something fresh to add that has not been put on the record—I will give her that opportunity now. Ms Harrison, is there something fresh?

Ms HARRISSON: It is to reconfirm the ventilation plan will be complete once the audit is complete, and I want to make sure the Committee has a full understanding of that. But it is not simply open the windows; it is audit and understand the needs of each of our learning spaces and respond to those needs specifically.

The CHAIR: Ms Harrison, I do not think—

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Harrison, what is happening to classrooms that are designed for more than one class where you have two classes within a learning space at the moment?

Ms HARRISSON: In a variety of those spaces we have larger classrooms where classrooms have been combined and we have joint teaching in practice occurring. Those are large spaces. Many of them have dividing walls in place. Mr Dizdar can give you some specific examples in relation to combined classes in our operational setting.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: My time will run out, so perhaps Mr Dizdar can provide that on notice. I will pass to my colleague and give her the opportunity to ask questions.

The CHAIR: Mr Dizdar, are you comfortable taking that on notice and providing details on notice?

Mr DIZDAR: Sure, if the Committee wants that.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: My question is to Mr Manning. What is the procurement time line for air filtration or air purifiers, given that you are not going to have your order completed for another week?

Mr MANNING: As I said in a previous answer, we have been working with a number of suppliers. The procurement process could be pretty short once we are very clear on the specification we want. There are a range of suppliers that would have stocks that could well be suited to the specification we need. As I say, I am not going to pre-empt a procurement process, but it would be a short procurement process and we believe there are stocks available, depending on the specification that we end on. We need to go through that procurement process to work

our way through it. I cannot speculate on how many are available and when they are available but, as I say, we have had numerous conversations with a range of suppliers and believe that there are stocks available to us. We have got to go through a procurement process first, but it will be a very short procurement process because effectively we can be clear about the specification that we need to have delivered to us.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You do not believe there is going to be an issue in terms of supply, given the numbers—156,000? Obviously not every classroom will have one but the numbers could be significant, couldn't they?

Mr MANNING: That is why we have been in discussion with a range of suppliers that we believe can commit that obligation.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: My question though is you are confident that once your audit is complete there will be sufficient stocks available to put in place safe classrooms in every classroom where necessary, according to all of the criteria you have outlined today? You are confident that we are not going to be back here in a month's time asking the same questions and the same story: "We can't get anything until March next year."

Mr MANNING: As the secretary has already mentioned, we are working really hard to get to that point. We endeavour to ensure that our schools are absolutely safe places, and we will continue to do that. We are confident that we have the measures in place that we need.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Are you aware that the Victorians had to get their air purifiers from Korea? When you say "suppliers", are they all Australian based or are they international?

Mr MANNING: There are a range of suppliers, Australian based and international.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Mr Martin, my question is about the Higher School Certificate [HSC]. How many particular subject exams for the HSC have been cancelled altogether?

Mr MARTIN: I think it is 11 of the Collaborative Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Languages [CCAFL] exams, the community language exams, and that is because they are national exams and are held prior to the return-to-school date for the safe return of the HSC on 9 November. I will get the exact number on notice for you.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Will you also tell us which ones they are? I am familiar with Tamil. If you are saying there are 11—

Mr MARTIN: I will provide you a full list on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Are there any that are not the community languages? Have any others fallen into this situation?

Mr MARTIN: No, it is precisely because the timetable for the CCAFL, community languages, is a national timetable. The students obviously have to sit the exams on the same day right around the country, otherwise you end up with issues of integrity. It is extremely unfortunate, but the health advice was for us not to begin the HSC until the 9th.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: How will those students be assessed for those subjects?

Mr MARTIN: We will be using the normal processes, which will be estimates and assessments based on the school work they have done so far, their school-based assessment et cetera. We will have ways. Our assessment committee will come up with options that are both fair to the students and valid.

The CHAIR: Ms Sharpe, your time has expired. Mr Martin, some water has passed under the bridge since I last asked you questions about the HSC. Will you provide information to the Committee about what measures will be undertaken and put in place to ensure that those students, especially in western and south-western Sydney, who have had such a rough trot getting prepared for the HSC, get a fair and equitable outcome in terms of scaling for the HSC?

Mr MARTIN: Thank you for your question. Mr Shoebridge. The last time I was in front of the Committee I indicated that we had worked primarily on making sure the school-based assessments were covered equitably, so the teachers marking their own students' assessment, the delay as long as possible for the return of marks and for the school-based assessment to occur. We also at that point had not yet determined on the full range of exams, the suite of exams that were to be sat. We now have of course 110 full suite, except for the CCAFL exams I mentioned earlier.

I will just put the context in place that there are significantly different circumstances for students right across New South Wales. Almost all students have had some levels, however slight, of disruption to their

face-to-face teaching. So the procedures and the processes we need to put in place need to be fair enough for the individual students in particular lockdown areas that have had really significant disadvantage but maintain the equity and the integrity of the exam process. So the COVID committee, which people are aware of—three sectors, two senior board members—will be looking at options imminently for providing a COVID special considerations approach for schools to apply to their students. It will need to be able to cover the large cohorts but still have enough integrity that students are not given more advantage in some areas than others. That will be provided to schools very early in term four, before the HSC, so that they can put in applications both for individual students and the full cohorts.

The CHAIR: Is it intended that there will be at least some options available for schools to put in applications on behalf of their entire year 12 cohort—say, a school that is in Fairfield that knows that its entire year 12 cohort has been locked down in very intense lockdown, with all of the difficulties that that entails. They will be able to put in an application on behalf of their entire year 12 school population? Is that the intent?

Mr MARTIN: It is the case though, even within those whole cohorts, that there are some students more significantly disadvantaged than others. We need to be able to balance the full cohort application process with individual and specific needs of individual students. But, yes, we are not going to try to produce a series of documentation that would have schools filling out enormous amounts of forms when the whole cohort has been disadvantaged.

The CHAIR: It is envisaged that schools will be able to make at least one application for their entire year 12 cohort which will be based upon specific disadvantage, based upon the lockdown experience that the school community has faced? Is that envisaged as part of the outcome?

Mr MARTIN: Without speculating on a policy or process that we have not yet decided on, my assessment of it would probably be that it will be differentiated by subject rather than full cohort because there are different disadvantages faced by some students depending on the nature of the subject. But your overarching point is correct that we will be attempting to make sure that we deal with the integrity of the exam, the specific nature of individual disadvantage but not create an enormous paperwork load for teachers and principals.

The CHAIR: And also not putting it down to parents and the disadvantaged students themselves that the work will be done—

Mr MARTIN: No.

The CHAIR: —because the most disadvantaged historically have had the least ability to access special disadvantage rules?

Mr MARTIN: There is some misunderstanding there, Mr Shoebridge. Illness/misadventure is largely, I think, equitably provided irrespective of advantage or disadvantage through SES [socio-economic status]. There are arguments that the process for students who have particular disabilities et cetera is disproportionately applied for. But in relation to illness and misadventure, we will be making sure that the individual student's personal disadvantage does not get in the way of the application in the COVID environment and the lockdown of the LGAs.

The CHAIR: It is envisaged that the applications will be made at a school level, rather than requiring the individual family or carers to be putting in the application?

Mr MARTIN: Yes.

The CHAIR: Ms Harrison, what additional supports are you going to be giving to teachers who are already dealing with so much to ensure that that process will be fair, that teachers will have the time that is needed to put in those applications so that year 12 students who have suffered the most actually get a fair shake?

Ms HARRISSON: Obviously we will be providing guidance and support to our schools to complete the NSW Education Standards Authority [NESA] processes. We await that final guidance on what will be required. We will then be providing further support. Mr Dizdar can give some further indication on the way that our schools will be approaching this task.

The CHAIR: Mr Dizdar, can you focus on additional resources and support you are giving?

Mr DIZDAR: As Mr Martin has outlined, once the procedures are clearly articulated to all of our schools, we will make sure we connect with all of our principals. We have been doing it on a weekly basis in those lockdown LGAs. The collegiality and sharing of experience and expertise is really important. So the Director, Educational Leadership, the executive director will support our principals to unpack for their context how they might resource that. In some context it might be taking a year adviser offline for a short period of time to assist with that process; it might be a deputy principal. It will be important for us to share what that practice can look

like so that we can support across schools. We stand ready, Mr Shoebridge, with our directors, Educational Leadership, to support schools that may not have that expertise as well.

The CHAIR: Given we know that additional workload will inevitably come on, are there plans afoot to bring in some casual teaching workforce to give that little surge of support that is needed? With the return to school, with the HSC and all the other stresses, surely that additional support should be being planned now?

Mr DIZDAR: Mr Shoebridge, I think you raise a very good point. What I would say about our casual workforce is that they are really important to us and we have been encouraging principals, even in the COVID environment, to keep up their employment. This is why I said connecting with everyone is going to be important. If a school needs to provide release for one of our experts—a year adviser, deputy, that I referenced—to be taken off line for a short period of time to assist with this process, then, sure, we will support that school in its endeavours to do that. But what I also hear from Mr Martin's answer is we are looking for a simplified process, recognising the context of those schools. I have been a secondary principal in the system, Mr Shoebridge. I know—it is a really good question that you have asked. It can take some degree of documentation in a normal year, but this is not a normal year, and Mr Martin and NESAs are recognising that. We are hopeful of a simplified process, but you are right, it may need support and we stand ready to support schools that may not have that expertise, might not have casuals to draw on and we will be working in a group of schools to try and leverage resources across schools as well.

The CHAIR: Mr Martin, assuming we get to a point by 8 November where, at least initially, HSC students across the State can attend to do exams, what arrangements will be in place where there is a COVID outbreak or there is a public health position adopted that, say, the students from one, two or 12 LGAs cannot safely attend to do exams? What is the practical way through on that?

Mr MARTIN: Thanks again for the question, Mr Shoebridge. We have had over the last 30 years of NESAs doing the HSC and before that occasions where there have been whole cohorts unable to get to exam rooms—bushfires, floods. We had 22 bomb scares last November and in some cases students could not return to an exam room or were unable to go into an exam room. So there is a long-established process, which generally for individual schools or for a particular emergency it would potentially be much wider applied this year if we need to, but we can do that and then we use the normal processes of looking at the school-based assessment to make estimates of where the students would have been on their HSC.

The CHAIR: Will that be by comparing the cohort in other exams? How will you be able to do a comparator potentially if you have a large number of schools that have not been able to sit their exam? How will that comparator work?

Mr MARTIN: I could not possibly explain that myself. We have a team of experts but we also use a technical advisory committee that are academic experts in assessment that come from a number of universities around New South Wales. They provide us with advice on the integrity of our methodologies. If we are talking about large cohorts, we would be looking primarily at the school-based assessment work. But as for moderators across other exams that may or may not have been sat, I could not go into detail now but we would explain it, of course, when we get to the point.

The CHAIR: Mr Martin, if you can provide on notice any further detail on either the equity measures relating to lockdown or those kind of pre-planned arrangements to deal with cohorts that cannot sit the exam, that would be gratefully accepted.

Mr MARTIN: I will happily do that, Mr Shoebridge. If I may also, the questions asked by Ms Sharpe earlier, there are 18 Collaborative Curriculum and Assessment Framework for Languages, CCAFL, exams. They were set for 19 October nationally and there are 303 students impacted by the cancellation of those exams. They were the questions, I think, that I took on notice.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Martin. Ms Harrison, what public health advice do you have if you have a high school with 1,500 students and maybe 200 teachers and support staff who return to school and then a year 9 student turns up and is found to be COVID positive after a day at school? Will the entire school community be close contacts? Will they be required to quarantine for 14 days? What will happen in practice in an example like that?

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you for the question. I am conscious this is an issue on parents' minds at the moment: How will this be managed? How much disruption might children face? We have been dealing with this in parts of the State in the first outbreak of COVID in New South Wales and then through this outbreak as well. We have a very well-trodden process that we understand and our schools know well. They are well supported by our work, health and safety directorate. As in the community, we carry out contact tracing and as a department we will be carrying out that contact tracing as we return to school to advise who is impacted and who is considered

a close contact. That is one of the reasons why limiting the mixing of cohorts on school sites is so important to us as one of the measures that we are putting in place. It means that in those circumstances the risk of transmission between cohorts is really minimised and so we will have the minimal disruption. Mr Dizdar has been through this process a number of times in the last term and can give you some insights into how that is managed locally.

The CHAIR: At least 150 schools across the State have been shut down for a fortnight after a COVID-positive incident at the school and with deep cleaning required. I am asking whether that is what you expect to happen going forward if a student or teacher is COVID positive, Can we expect the school to be shut down for 14 days for deep cleaning and everyone has to home quarantine?

Ms HARRISSON: In very few examples would we have the whole school quarantining for two weeks. That has occurred in a small number of cases. Mr Dizdar can give some further information on that.

Mr DIZDAR: Mr Shoebridge, I can tell the Committee that only on three occasions this year have we had schools that have had a confirmed COVID case where we have had to switch to at-home learning for more than nine days. That has been cases where there has been a determined large number of close contacts in that school, in one case the entire school. But by far the vast majority, Mr Shoebridge, have been only non-operational for face-to-face teaching learning for one day. We have been able to do the close contact tracing, cleaning and communication and then have a return to face to face.

The CHAIR: But, Mr Dizdar, the past is not necessarily a great indicator for the future because in most of those cases you had a very small number of students and teachers at school and that is why you have not got the mixing issue and the large number of close contacts. That is not necessarily a good indicator of what is going to happen after 25 October, is it?

Mr DIZDAR: I understand your question and it is a fair question that you ask. The data that I gave you though is on the Delta outbreak; it is not on the outbreak of last year. This goes to what Ms Harrisson said as secretary. For our return-to-school plan, the school that you referenced, the 1,500, 1,700—it could be Westfield Sports High School, a large school. Let me just unpack what they are doing at that school. They already have different bell times, start period alteration, recess, lunch, conclusion of day for different cohorts. We are encouraging cohorting—say, year 9 staying in their core curriculum areas of maths, English, science, moving together as a group into electives, having specific playground space just for year 9. We need to do this and our school leaders are doing this to limit how many students or staff become close contacts if there is a COVID case. In this secondary context, don't forget, Mr Shoebridge, doubly vaccinated adults, mask wearing for all of our students as well. We do not proclaim that is easy but these are the measures that will help if there is a case to limit the number of close contacts of that individual.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that detail, Mr Dizdar. Unfortunately time has beaten us. I am sure there are a good many more issues that the Opposition would like to examine, as would have the crossbench. I thank you all for your work. I know that sometimes these questions focus on the issues. I can assure you it is the concerted wish of the entire Committee that the return to school is safe, that it is designed safely, that it is invested in safely, and that our kids, teachers and support staff can get back to school as safely and as promptly as possible. You have our collective good wishes in this space but, I can assure you, you also will have our collective oversight going forward about what is happening. Again, thank you very much for the work you are doing.

Ms HARRISSON: Thank you, Mr Shoebridge. We welcome both the oversight and the sharing in our objective here. I know that many of you on the screen here have been managing learning from home yourselves during the last term and acknowledge how challenging that can be. I am sure we will all be glad when our students can safely return to the classroom.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

JODIE McVERNON, Professor and Director of Epidemiology, Doherty Institute, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome back to our final session of the New South Wales Public Accountability Committee COVID-19 oversight inquiry. We are very grateful that we can be joined this afternoon by Professor Jodie McVernon, who is Director of Epidemiology at the Doherty Institute, which seems to be squarely on point, given the issues we have at hand. You have the opportunity now to give a brief opening statement.

Professor McVERNON: Thank you. I understand that the questions I am being asked are around the relationship between the modelling we have conducted to inform the National Plan and the New South Wales response. In doing that, I will just briefly cap on what is infectious diseases modelling and, basically, mathematical models are logical frameworks for thinking about consequences. They represent the processes in a system that lead to observed outcomes and in infectious disease models look at the steps that lead from someone being susceptible to infected and infectious and recovered.

Important things that influence that process and outcomes include how much people mix with each other, their ages and whether they are vaccinated, and we can incorporate those into a model. Models can be used to analyse past or emerging data and that helps us get a better understanding of the key elements involved in those processes. But they are very useful in uncertain times to bring together emerging evidence to think through and project in time about what might happen. So we separate out very clearly these scenario models that are logical forward exercises from those that are used in analysis or even in short-term forecasting. So that situational assessment monitoring is a different activity.

In terms of our modelling for the National Plan, our advice to national Cabinet was that even high levels of completed vaccine coverage in Australia won't stop COVID in its tracks. At 70 and 80 per cent coverage thresholds, we believe the vaccine will substantially reduce transmission of the virus and do more of the heavy lifting of COVID control, but ongoing public health responses and low levels of social restrictions are still recommended to keep disease low. Our report to national Cabinet on 17 September tested the robustness of our overall recommendations if COVID was already established in a community with tens or hundreds or thousands of daily infections at the time of reaching most transitions.

In the majority of cases our conclusions were not changed but there was one important exception, and that was in transitioning to phase B at 70 per cent if there were thousands—and we simulated 1,000 to 4,500 infections in the community on that day—there was a possibility of what we call overshoot. So epidemics grow, they have a certain momentum, and even if the epidemic transmission's potential, we talk about, is starting to reduce and the epidemic is going into decline from high case numbers, the epidemic can still take a little while to stop growing. In that situation the epidemic that we simulated peaked earlier and was larger overall. So our advice was, in thinking about the balance of measures, a precautionary approach would be to maintain what in the model we termed "medium" restrictions, as opposed to "low", until getting to the 80 per cent threshold.

In terms of relation to the road map, as we stated in our report, these are high-level scenarios to inform strategy, and translating them into action requires ongoing mapping to the situation, what is happening in terms of epidemic growth, clinical impacts, how the public health response is working, the existing level of restrictions and behaviours and local vaccine coverage. The road map applies those principles about the synergies of control measures. It takes a cautious staged approach to lifting restrictions from the 70 per cent threshold. It refers clearly to the need for further fine-tuning and health advice if circumstances change or if cases in a designated area remain too high. By providing greater freedoms first to only people who are fully vaccinated, it is even more cautious in that lifting of restrictions because vaccinated people are less likely to become infected and if they do, they are less infectious to other people and obviously less at risk of severe outcomes and clinical consequence.

The CHAIR: Thank you for that very neat summary. I will hand over to the Opposition to commence the first round of questions.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you for coming along today. Your explanation has been extremely helpful to the Committee and obviously to all of our State executives and State Government. My questions really go to that 70 to 80 per cent change. What do "medium" public health and social distancing measures mean? My reading of the New South Wales road map is that really we are moving towards a lot of the lower public health and social measures [PHSMs], when it seems to me that your recommendations suggest that we need to stay more in the medium mode as to where we are in a lot of places. Would you talk us through the issues that we should be aware of when we are thinking about that?

Professor McVERNON: In the reports that we have, we have at the back a table of what we call—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, that is exactly what I am looking at.

Professor McVERNON: And it is really important to understand that those are not our recommendations. These were periods of time—and actually New South Wales was one of the few jurisdictions that implemented controls without full lockdown. So based on the experience of staged disease controls, we could actually estimate the impact of those measures on population behaviours and population movements. We actually conduct weekly surveys looking at how people behave personally, how many contacts they make, and look at other mobility indicators. So under those levels of restrictions, at those times they correlated with population behaviours that represented a level of disease control that we could estimate and then we could use those estimates in the models moving forward and so step them through.

Obviously every State and Territory has slightly different versions of those measures. In fact, the thing that is important is what the population actually does. In thinking about how those measures map to the future, again it comes back to the situational monitoring, how do we actually see from what we call the "transmission potential", which we report every week, that those measures are impacting on the population behaviour. So they are there as examples; they are there as sort of gradings. And, in fact, we know that spontaneous population behaviours feed into those as well; it is not all about the public health orders. Those links from orders to observed transmission were also in a period where vaccination was not in play. In thinking, "How does that map to the future?", I think we also have to make allowance for the fact that in allowing vaccinated people greater social freedoms, we actually have not measured that before but we expect that those people would make less contribution to spread. That is how I relate them in time.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That is right. I understood that they were not recommendations, they were trying to map between the two. I am very interested though that there seems to be a lot of grey space. I assume that really what you are saying to us is that slow opening up with constant measurement is the key and the population recognising that people may have to go in and out of different restrictions depending on how that operates, and the best guess at this point is we are not sure, we will have to see how it goes. Is that a reasonable description?

Professor McVERNON: Yes. It is what we have had to do for the last 18 months. It is about adaptation and monitoring. It is an adaptive management approach which is really what we are foreshadowing, yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That is great. The second part of this obviously is the ability to do contact tracing. It is pretty clear in New South Wales that really we have been struggling for a while in relation to keeping up with contact tracing. The testing is still going well, but can you provide some thoughts on the importance of contact tracing, particularly in this opening up period?

Professor McVERNON: Yes. Again, we talk about partial and optimal TTIQ in the report.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry, can you just spell—test, trace, isolate, quarantine. This is for Hansard.

Professor McVERNON: Sorry, yes. Test, trace, isolate, quarantine—that is right. That public health response of case finding and contact ascertainment and isolation and quarantine. The optimal TTIQ response was actually based on NSW Health performance over a period of four months, including the Crossroads and Christmas-New Year outbreaks. That was an indicator of sustained high effectiveness. And, in fact, again, we estimated the overall impact on spread. We also looked at the observed metrics about timeliness at that time, because timeliness is everything. And what we found—the thing that is important to remember about COVID is that we know, and this was apparent early in the response, about half of the infectiousness of the case probably happens before they know they are infectious, before they are symptomatic. And that means that isolation as a measure has limited effectiveness. And we knew this at the beginning. That is why we said we were going to need social measures. That is obviously important, how quickly you isolate people—test them and isolate them and get them away—but also how quickly you find their contacts and quarantine them. And, in fact, most of the bang for your buck in TTIQ is from the quarantine part, because it is getting people before they know they are infectious that is important. And we saw the overall reduction due to TTIQ was about a 53 per cent reduction overall in onward infection transmission at that best time.

And then we took partial TTIQ from Victoria at the height of the second wave, where other States and Territories were helping. It was a very stressed response. And it came down to about 42 per cent or 43 per cent. Do not quote me on the numbers but it is in that ballpark—a 20 per cent loss of effectiveness over demonstrably different processes. And I think that is quite important to reflect on because actually, when we think about what we now do in contact tracing, we know most transmission occurs in households. We see some transmission in work groups and workplaces and at social functions, which right now we do not have. And those are reasonably identifiable. The kinds of contact tracing procedures that we have had in place over the past 18 months have been about zero tolerance and saying, "Alright, we can get to the majority of people with one or maybe two rings of

contact tracing, but we're going to go all the way out to Bunnings and the supermarket because if we miss even one, that has a consequence in an un-immunised population where we have to stamp out every last infection."

I think it is very important that in reflecting on what we have escalated over the past 18 months in terms of contact tracing and what the demonstrated efficiency and effectiveness of every single one of those actions is, most of the value will still be in the core activities in terms of trying to reduce transmission. So in that household circle, in those known close contacts, in the workplace, for example. Ongoing work is underway as part of our modelling for the National Plan and trying to understand what is actually happening on the ground with TTIQ. But I think what everyone understands and in thinking about what sustainable responses are going forward, we do not need to do everything we used to do and we will actually do things more efficiently and effectively by focusing closer on nearer-to-hand contacts, being able to get to them quickly and ensuring effectiveness that way. So it is really a streamlining process in that condition.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you. My final question before I hand over to my colleagues is your reporting talks about operation shield and obviously the safe return of kids to school, something that every parent who has got a kid at home is desperate for. Yes! Could you give us an update on where that is up to and where you think that is going?

Professor McVERNON: From our modelling point of view? Yes. What we are doing is helping to support the jurisdictions in their risk appraisal of the types of levels of measures that are most effective at helping children to resume and stay in face-to-face education safely. We are thinking about in the context of surrounding community levels of vaccination and infection transmission, and really putting up the kind of operational response questions about what is the lowest level of risk in the first instance and then what is your best strategy around things like contact tracing or other things, and at what point would you say a school might need to close. It is really helping people work through that in a kind of risk quantification way based on strategies that are being considered and have been implemented elsewhere and where there is some quantitative evidence for their effectiveness. That is all ongoing.

And, obviously, since our first phase work was done, we have 12- to 15-year-old immunisation, we have high uptake, particularly in those higher years of education where face to face is critical. So we can think through scenarios about how that does change the risk environment for children and teachers to be immunised but, most importantly, for their families and communities to be immunised. Because, as we said in our first work, immunising parents is actually key. If you look at the UK example, it is the community risk that influences the importations into schools, and that really is where that focus in the first place was targeted.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Terrific, thank you.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thank you so much, Professor McVernon, for your time today, but especially for the very important work that you are doing to inform our way out. I want to ask you specifically on the return-to-school model. Have you done any specific modelling on how many cases you think there should be within the community before it should prompt a return to at-home learning? I will give you the context. Our previous session today was actually with the Department of Education, and one of the questions we obviously have is children will be returning to school just as we are starting to open up. In fact, several weeks after we start to open up it is likely that we may see a spike in cases within the community. Have you done modelling on what would be the tipping point that would mean that they would not be able to return to school?

Professor McVERNON: Our first phase of deliverables are next week, and in that we have a scenario-based approach. So it would basically be saying for a community of this type with this level of coverage, we have a strong equity focus here. So we are actually very interested in representing key features, say, of small areas where there may be increased culturally and linguistically diverse [CALD] communities, larger household size, other factors that would be associated with increased risk of transmission in homes and potentially varying levels of coverage. So really thinking about what the implications might be in different types of communities where there can be different levels of control. And I think then our focus is really what would be the redoubled efforts in schools, particularly given the educational risks to those children of not being able to resume face-to-face learning, particularly if distance learning and other things are limited.

So that is the motivating equity question when we have transitioned our work to the implementation level. What is the risk of importation into the school? How do you then reduce the consequences of that in terms of spreading that environment, but also maximising as much as possible opportunities for children to still attend education? There are many other strategies that have been used internationally and it is a way that we can interrogate that, and that may mean that there are more focused responses and additional resources applied to those higher risk areas than to areas with very little transmission. I think when keeping schools open is the goal then it about what other things do you need to put in place in particular settings.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: How important is ventilation in that equation?

Professor McVERNON: I know this is a very fraught issue. We have spoken extensively with airflow engineers. I am actually part of projects for the City of Melbourne and at the University of Melbourne looking at these issues in other educational environments. I know different jurisdictions are taking different positions on this. My personal view based on my understanding of the evidence, speaking to the experts that I work with, is that clearly airborne transmission is one route by which COVID-19 can spread. Being in very low airflow environments does increase the risk that it might spread. There are demonstrable measures that can increase air exchanges to a very high level, and there is a quantifiable way of how many airflow exchanges you need to reduce risk. If you are in a negative pressure room in a hospital, in an isolation room, that risk is extremely low. But the interventions needed to get to that very low level are quite substantial. And in a school environment, where children are not sitting individually in hospital beds or cubicles, there are many other close-contact opportunities for infection spread. So how important that single modality is to infection transmission is, I think, highly debatable in the educational environment. I have teenagers and I have heard their reports of social distancing in the school environment—whatever the best measures are.

We see that we can model in a way that we feel is quantifiable things like cohorting of classes. Reducing mixing group sizes is something you can definitely calculate the consequence of for infection and outbreaks, looking at vaccination coverage in teachers and students, looking at many of these other things. I think these structural modifications, we feel confident we can quantify. We have an approach to say, "Well, if there are other measures in the environment that can be modified to reduce transmission by a proportion, this is what their additional impact might be." So then are we confident that the measures would reduce transmission by that much? So it is really putting the weighting back on the evidence for that reduction to say, "Well, does that justify the addition of a particular intervention?" That is the approach we have chosen based on our appraisal of how quantifiable the evidence is.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: And obviously these are very dynamic environments, particularly with small children. I have small children so I know the difficulties in the idea of social distancing or mask-wearing in a kindy or year 1 class. It seems a little difficult to me. That is why we obviously need to be aware of those other factors that are layering onto it.

Professor McVERNON: Yes, that is right. So that is why, for us, are children likely to arrive at school infected? Are teachers likely to arrive at school infected? What are the opportunities there, particularly between adults, that might amplify risks in the school environment I think we see as things we can also weigh up. We are not explicitly modelling early childhood environments, to be clear. And also, just to be clear, the objective of our work is really focused on the influence of the community on transmission risks in schools, not how schools contribute to risks in the community, because everything we see tells us it is more of an inward flow.

The CHAIR: That initial round from the Opposition has expired. I will hand over to Ms Faehrmann.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you, Chair. I want to go first to the virulence of the Delta strain. I note reports in the media this week about the international experience of Delta, and that is that a person is almost twice as likely as someone with the Alpha variant to be hospitalised. But I understand the Doherty's modelling has not factored the virulence of Delta into its modelling. What impact does that have, do you think, firstly on your modelling potentially and what impact it could have on the 70 per cent reduced restrictions that New South Wales is pursuing?

Professor McVERNON: Sure. So, to be clear, our modelling very much thinks about Delta. These models were first configured in July and based on the evidence then. So in terms of transmissibility and infectiousness and vaccine effectiveness, those parameters really have not shifted. So most of our work is really focused on how we control spread. In terms of thinking about consequences, yes, at that time it was maybe the same as Alpha, maybe better, maybe worse. We agree now it is worse and our future modelling will take that forward. But really our overall strategy was one of minimising case numbers, and that was a combined recommendation to Treasury, by aiming to achieve control through the synergy of interventions. So our recommendation to keep case numbers as low as possible holds, and we do not think it is actually substantively changed by that.

Some people see scenarios that produce tables of relative outcomes as predictions. So in that situation you would need to increase those numbers, but those numbers are really there to compare outcomes to give you a strategy. So in terms of actually mapping what that meant and in thinking about health system consequences, it again brings you back to the situational assessment, which says, "Okay, we've now updated our understanding of severity. If our objective locally is to keep things within health system capacity then we need to see how current infections are tracking to our estimates of local burden." So that is the mapping of the strategy to the present.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: With the second dose, it takes two to three weeks, does it not, after that second dose for that double dose to really be as effective. So Doherty's modelling—when you are talking about 70 per cent and 80 per cent double dose, do you factor that in?

Professor McVERNON: Yes. We made that clear. We were asked that question by National Cabinet and in our last report we made that point clearly, that we are talking about introduction at the threshold, which is when the immunisation register says we get there. And the model is a dynamic model and there are individuals in the model who are immunised, and two weeks after they are immunised that full effectiveness kicks in. So, yes, that is all made allowance for.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: So, in other words, there is this kind of date, if you like, that we are tracking to have 70 per cent double dosed. Really it is two to three weeks after what we are tracking because I think people are talking at the moment about potentially 10 or 11 October, if you like. But that is the date that we tick over just in a number, 70 per cent—

Professor McVERNON: Yes [inaudible].

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: —but we do not tick over in—we are more like 60 per cent double dose. Is that right?

Professor McVERNON: No. What we have modelled—when governments are talking about, "We want to get to 70 per cent doses administered, ticked off in the book, in the register," that is exactly the point at which we made our transitions. So within the model, for people who were immunised in their second dose—the ones who were immunised within the last two weeks would take another two weeks to build up to full immunity. We actually worked out that at the 70 per cent and 80 per cent threshold that was maybe 12 per cent of people.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Got you. Okay, so you are—

Professor McVERNON: We have accounted for that. We also, in our model—because by the time we get to 80 per cent of people or 70 per cent of people with two doses, there is another about 10 per cent or 12 per cent who have had a single dose. And those people are also contributing to the control of infection in the community. So they are also accounted for in the simulations.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Okay, alright. Thank you. That is actually a very good clarification. Doherty's findings around relaxing restrictions at 70 per cent double dose as well are, and I quote from the report:

... conditional on public health workforce and response capacity which varies nationally...

What are your observations around the capacity of the NSW Health workforce, particularly when it comes to what the New South Wales Government is proposing to do at 70 per cent, and that is to relax restrictions around pubs and clubs, for example, reopening? Do you think our public workforce is one of those states that can cope with that?

Professor McVERNON: Again, this is around the control objective. So in thinking about that workforce and response capacity, it is back to what is your TTIQ looking like? What is that case finding looking like and how is that controlling disease? And by keeping numbers static or lowering them—we are already seeing in parts of New South Wales the turnover in some areas because of the high immunisation uptake. We would anticipate that as the vaccine does more heavy lifting, that would happen in more areas. It is for that system to understand its capacity for response. But by acknowledging that vaccination is doing more of the holding, and therefore you can ease, you are really trying to achieve a level steady state, essentially, or bring cases down over time.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Could you expand on why then though it was particularly noted in the executive summary of the Doherty modelling report that the 70 per cent reopening was conditional on the public health workforce being able to cope? Because, of course, you would be very well aware of the situation with our public hospitals, the situation with our ambulances. I think, on average, the last week was 59 minutes or something for some calls. It is quite extraordinary already and we have not hit the peak. Why did Doherty put in its report that opening up or relaxing some public health measures at 70 per cent was conditional on that?

Professor McVERNON: It is public health workforce as it relates to TTIQ system performance because we say, "Here's what your public health response is achieving, here's what your social measures are achieving, here's what vaccination is achieving for you." So it is all about that triangulation. And obviously health sector capacity is another issue, and jurisdictions will have to tightrope within that as well based on their situational assessment.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Because even with our capacity [inaudible].

Professor McVERNON: That workforce capacity is there, yes. We are recognising, for instance, Tasmania and South Australia have a much smaller public health workforce and response capacity than New South Wales, for example.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Yes, but our TTIQ capacity, when you consider some stories that have come out recently of people being at home for 30 or 40 days after testing positive and being unable to have a NSW Health person return their call, would suggest that that particular aspect of the workforce is not able to cope at the moment.

Professor McVERNON: That is for part of the local assessment to be made. And, as I say, it comes down to what is the demonstrable effectiveness. In the situational assessments that we do, just to be clear, every week an overlapping team of researchers to those who have produced this report report weekly to the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee [AHPPC]. I do not know if you are aware of our regular work, and that is used by the chief health officers [CHOs]. And that work talks about transmission potential. So it is this idea of how is the community behaving and how likely is it for infections to spread? We also look at the effective reproduction number from currently active cases. And that metric says how well is the health response holding spread from current cases. And that is a factor both of the timeliness of responses but also often where the infection is spreading.

So, for example, in Victoria in the second wave outbreak we had outbreaks in hospitals and aged-care facilities where the infection was spreading in larger numbers. In some States and Territories there are challenges in covert networks where the infection is spreading and has opportunity to spread. So both of those metrics give us some idea of what is happening, and also we look to estimate how the response is holding cases. So those two things are both separate indicators.

The CHAIR: Thanks very much, Professor, for your very detailed answers. And already I think we are getting some additional clarification on your report. Your 17 September addendum report—Ms Faehrmann was asking you about your assumptions about the infection rate of the Delta virus. And you had not changed the assumptions as at 17 September to what had been in your earlier report. Is that right?

Professor McVERNON: Yes, that is right. We felt confident that the severity outcomes—there were some seminal publications only about two to three weeks ago. I am sorry, time concertinas in my head. We have been consulting with Health to be sure that that is the most robust. We have updated that for the next tranche of work. But for a model that was developed in July, we were asked to look at a specific seeding assumption around control. So we did not update that piece for that.

The CHAIR: Professor, none of this is intended in the slightest as a criticism.

Professor McVERNON: [Inaudible].

The CHAIR: That you are able to respond in real time to that information that has come in from international studies I think is a genuine credit to you. When we look at the numbers in that 17 September report on ward admissions and ICU admissions, are they the numbers that you would expect to increase, all other things being equal—

Professor McVERNON: Yes.

The CHAIR: —when you took into account the greater severity of Delta?

Professor McVERNON: Yes. It is those clinical outcomes that would be different and that would be—yes, we also report them by age categories and we report them by vaccination status and we report them there. And really, for the purpose of that exercise, it is saying, "Well, what are the most influential things to reduce those?" So we start with baseline social measures, which is basically everybody pretty free range and partial TTIQ because we say, "Well, okay, high numbers—it's not going to be feasible to do the best." But then by increasing low-level measures or medium-level measures and other things, you show that you can actually then reduce those outcomes further.

The CHAIR: Professor, I am going to apologise now for being an MP and not an epidemiologist and put this to you: If the severity of outcomes of Delta is something like twice what the initial assumptions were, does that produce something like twice the numbers of ward admissions and ICU admissions? And, if not, can you talk us through that?

Professor McVERNON: Yes. I have actually—it is not a simple question you are asking, so it is not a silly question at all. In the unvaccinated group I would say yes, you could probably double them in the aged cohorts. In the vaccinated group, though, it is more complicated because the vaccine progression from just getting infected to then developing symptoms, and then if you have symptoms what is the probability of going to a hospital

bed and from there what is the probability of ICU? I actually do not know honestly in my mind whether those would just automatically double, because there is this stepwise progression of vaccine effects that we observe. So I would have to take that on notice. And obviously in our future work—we are actually doing some work at the moment on clinical outcomes for just these scenarios with the updated parameters at the level of all of the States and Territories, which is actually a much more meaningful level to start thinking about this because Australia is not going to have a single national COVID epidemic.

The CHAIR: No, indeed. [Inaudible].

Professor McVERNON: It is deliberately a high level abstraction as a thought experiment. And in moving forward, as I say, we are doing additional work for the Commonwealth with the new parameters at a level that we believe translates more to a real clinical capacity question. And obviously New South Wales has had Burnet and others modelling, and they do slightly different assumptions, and the same in Victoria. Our models come up with the same broadly sensible conclusions. The actual scenario projections on cases will differ depending on exactly the assumptions that are used. And, in reality, in monitoring the situation sometimes I think overall things have been better in some cases than anticipated, but it also then depends on what the communities are who are affected by the virus and whether they have greater underlying risk factors and health determinants and so on. And so this is where all our—and our next phase of work is really thinking more about these local population effects and how important they are.

The CHAIR: I will come to that in one second, but if policymakers are looking at your initial two reports and looking at policy settings that take us close to the threshold—or maybe slightly beyond the threshold—of our capacity in the health system, particularly ICUs, then there should be a degree of caution used by policymakers in relying upon those numbers, given the developing state of the evidence in regard to the severity of Delta. Would that be a fair takeaway?

Professor McVERNON: Yes. We would say in taking the high-level principles, they need to be mapping to what is happening in front of them.

The CHAIR: If we are making statewide policy decisions in circumstances where we are likely to have pockets, perhaps entire regions, with significantly lower vaccination rates—and communities like First Nations communities are especially vulnerable—how does that feature in your modelling? Is that maybe what you are working on over the next few weeks?

Professor McVERNON: So, again, we were actually very disappointed that we had to keep doing sensitivity analyses on the first model because we are undertaking this additional body of work. And in that situation we are looking at—obviously there has been a strong focus of all public health units and health responders to really look and seek to improve coverage as much as possible in populations who are deemed at higher risk because of underlying determinants. What we are doing is helping to think that through in terms of whether we should actually have higher aspirational targets in some groups to achieve greater equity of health outcomes.

But if that cannot be achieved, for whatever reason—and obviously removing barriers and improving access is key, but in some communities there is still hesitancy—then what we are saying is, "Well, then in this titration of you have your TTIQ response and you have other public health and social measures, how should that be interpreted at the local responder level?" And really, in thinking about what is TTIQ moving forward, you would probably concentrate more of those resources in areas with lower coverage or at higher risk. And in that we are also thinking about reactive immunisation, and we have seen that used very effectively in New South Wales in local government areas and how that has helped.

The CHAIR: And probably ongoing travel restrictions into regional parts of New South Wales that have lower vaccination rates would be one of the ongoing control measures. Would that be right?

Professor McVERNON: The National Plan allows for locally and generally applied measures as needed for disease control, but that would be up to the jurisdictions to determine how best to manage that risk. I know many jurisdictions are considering those kinds of place-based restrictions, lock-ins and all sorts of things in remote communities and so on. But that is something that is completely within the jurisdiction's ability to use as a control measure.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Professor. I will pass back to the Opposition now.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thank you very much, Chair. I have a couple of final questions. I think our time is fast running out, unfortunately. Professor McVernon, you talk about partial TTIQ and optimal TTIQ. Where would New South Wales be sitting at the moment in its contact tracing?

Professor McVERNON: Yes. Clearly it is not optimal. We can all answer that. In terms of how close is it to what that partial TTIQ in Victoria at the height of the second wave achieved, those analyses are ongoing, looking at data that is currently in the response. But I actually do not have the answers to that. Those analyses are not finished. Our modelling team is working closely with CDNA, the Communicable Diseases Network Australia, and the public health units, and also AHPPC, to think strategically about these responses moving forward. And a large part of that, of working out what are actually the key components of an effective response, is being determined by learning from what is happening in New South Wales and Victoria right now and measuring that. But the answers are not back on that.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: If you can answer this, can we get back to the optimal, or what would we need to get back to the optimal, because that is obviously a crucial part of your plan?

Professor McVERNON: Optimal, if you can do it, is clearly great. And I think a lot of the smaller jurisdictions without COVID are aiming to keep that going for as long as possible. And I think everybody appreciates that there will be gradations of working out at what point you start to set things back. Things like a four-hour case interview becomes a one-hour case interview. There are lots of ways to improve efficiencies in the system. I think the important thing is really determining what are the key metrics that mean the system is starting to struggle. And we know the one that means it will not work, is that time to isolation of the index case. Once that starts to slide then you kind of lose everything after.

And so there are even specific things about if you get to this many days and you have not got to a case, who do you put in the queue next? It is actually a queueing problem, it is an efficiency issue, it is thinking about where you are going to get maximum gain. And we have showed early on that one of the problems we had very early in some of the responses back last year was over-testing of the worried well for no indication, for example, puts enormous strain on the testing system and leads to systemwide delays that mean the people who need to be tested cannot get tested. So this whole idea of efficiency, of optimising, of restricting your focus and improving the timeliness is more important than just keeping doing more. You have to think about the value of responding, the value of testing, and optimising that value to be sure that you achieve the response objective, which is not just more of everything, it is actually limiting spread. So we have done a lot of this kind of strategic work with AHPPC and the Public Health Laboratory Network over the past year about thinking of the value of doing things. And that really that same approach that we have had to the value of testing is really, I guess, what is happening with TTIQ right now—what is the value of different response actions so that you can really prioritise?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I am sorry, that will be available next week? Is that right?

Professor McVERNON: We are already on very punishing timelines.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Oh, okay.

Professor McVERNON: We are reporting a deliverable to National Cabinet next week. We are doing this work in parallel with Health and we both have reporting deliverables which will be linked but represent their work as well as our work. They have proposed strategies, we use models that then help people do the quantitative risk assessment around proposals, and that goes back into their thinking. We will have developed our models further in response to that and they will have come to their conclusions. But that is due to National Cabinet on 15 October.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Sorry, I am not trying to impose greater [inaudible].

Professor McVERNON: No. I am just explaining. I am just giving you the complete answer to when we are reporting. We are already looking forward to all of that.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: I think I might have time for one final question, which is how useful is more informal notifications, like we have seen in the past and still in regional areas—the notification of shops or retail centres that have had a positive case? In Sydney that has dropped off now. How useful is that in your optimal TTIQ?

Professor McVERNON: That is exactly the sort of question that we are interrogating. At low case numbers and with a zero COVID strategy, those kinds of things were really important because you could not afford to miss one. We had rare examples—the BWS in Berala around Christmas where three bottle shop workers got infected and thousands of people are in and out. That is a disaster waiting to happen. But actually those sorts of transmission events in supermarkets are vanishingly rare and are not regularly repeated. So it is exactly trying to work out how often they are needed, because you also get to a tipping point where it is not only—or the public health response effort that is going into those things but in some regional towns, like Shepparton, when one-third of the population was in quarantine, nobody could actually get supermarket deliveries and even McDonald's was

closed at six o'clock. So the societal impacts of over-measures when that is no longer your objective, that is exactly the tipping point that people are looking to find now.

The CHAIR: Ms Houssos, we are going to pass across to Ms Cate Faehrmann for the final session.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: Thank you. I want to ask about the modelling in relation to the death rate. Here in New South Wales I am sure you have seen our hospitals will go into potentially code red and code black, and part of that is severe and overwhelmed. And, as a result of being severe and overwhelmed, the nurse-to-patient ratio suffers. There is an alternative workforce that is called Team Nursing, so in other words there are not enough nurses per patient. How is that factored in, in reduced care? And, because of time, I will also throw this in as well. We have had people die at home with our hospital at home program. Is that also factored into the modelling?

Professor McVERNON: This kind of system stress issue is really difficult. And actually early in the pandemic we were very wary of taking any kind of case fatality estimates from New York or Italy or other places where the health system was clearly overstressed and there was prioritisation of resource access and extrapolating that. I think over time, as things have got more steady, the kinds of estimates of death rates we are using now are based on very busy systems but ones that have been kind of optimised for higher case loads but not completely overwhelmed. And I think in terms of understanding the Australian environment, it has actually been very hard to learn from the Australian experience because, given our low case threshold—our hospitalisation rates are far above other countries' but that is because some jurisdictions hospitalise everybody who has COVID.

I think the really critical question there is learning from what is happening in New South Wales right now and learning how we can apply that to our own experience, because I think this has been a different question in different health systems at different times around the world, given their baseline capacities and the extent to which they have been stressed. And the out of hospital thing is also to be monitored and evaluated. Our models explicitly do not think of that. They do have pathways for people who cannot be admitted or cannot get into ICU, and those people might die out of hospital. But we do not explicitly model all of these alternative care flows that are currently in place to see how people accrue within those. It is a simpler representation of the system.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: So some of the modelling that suggests higher rates of hospitalisation—just to be clear—does not take into consideration the fact that the level of care may be reduced?

Professor McVERNON: No. We have an access and a level of care and a length of stay, and we can report back what that length of stay means for capacity. And even that length of stay has varied over time and place, yes.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: With the hospital at home program, are you also suggesting that hospitalisations include the people who are pretty sick and they are getting hospital at-home treatment, or is that actually—

Professor McVERNON: Our pathways are not that complex. Our pathways have assumptions about people who will have a degree of severity of symptoms that would be sufficient to require care and then those people can move through the system in various ways. But at the time of configuring it we did not work through the various care pathways that are there now. And we would have trouble, I think, configuring quantitative evidence to support outcomes in those different pathways if we have not seen them overseas or until we have enough evidence here to see that.

Ms CATE FAEHRMANN: I have one final question that I think I have time for. The new Doherty Institute modelling that was presented to National Cabinet I think last week and has been reported in *The Guardian* talked about the fact that:

... when thousands of cases were seeded at 70% with the same assumptions about public health measures and testing and tracing, the size of the epidemic increased "significantly" because "the window in time between 70% and 80% coverage is sufficient to allow early epidemic growth from high numbers".

What does "increased significantly" mean?

Professor McVERNON: Again, this was all scenario driven, and we set up scenarios so we can compare difference. The scenario that is talking about is the baseline public health and social measures, free-range population, some personal protective behaviours and partial TTIQ in place. What happened in that scenario—we wanted to see where the assumptions would break. By seeding the infection at thousands at 70 per cent, and given the rate of vaccine rollout in the model, which took another couple of weeks to get to 80 per cent—by the time that you got to 80 per cent, under those conditions the infections with no restrictions in place had the potential to grow to tens of thousands. And I think that is an important reality check, that what we see in New South Wales is actually a controlled scenario. People forget that, because it is how quickly this can grow.

And at that point you are entering 80 per cent with tens of thousands of infections. And because the epidemic is growing faster, it keeps growing even though, overall, things are slowing down. It is this overshoot phenomenon that I mentioned. At that point that is why we said having stronger suppressions, keeping case numbers more constant so that you are at more of a constant level at 80 per cent, from that point on epidemics were kind of shifted to the left. Instead of taking a while to take off, they come up a little bit earlier. But otherwise their overall course was much less affected by that seeding number. So the adaptive approach was what we were proposing.

The CHAIR: We have unfortunately run out of time. I am going to ask the indulgence of the Committee to ask one final question about whether or not mandatory vaccination for different classes of occupations is an important control measure, particularly while you are transitioning through that 70 per cent to 80 per cent vaccination rate. Was that one of the control measures you looked at? And, if so, how important was it?

Professor McVERNON: No. We did not look at that in our reporting. Our model is simplistic. It has vaccination as a widespread measure, as all other measures are widespread.

The CHAIR: Professor, can I thank you on behalf of the entire Committee for your evidence today. You have sliced and diced our questions with a degree of frankness and clinical thoroughness that has given me further confidence in the rigours of your analysis. I look forward very much to being able to see your reports as they progress over the next few weeks. On behalf of the Committee, thank you for your evidence today. Thank you for your work and for bringing your expertise to these very, very tricky public policy questions.

Professor McVERNON: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: That concludes today's hearing of the Public Accountability Committee's COVID oversight. I want to thank all members and witnesses for their assistance today.

(The witness withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 16:25.